

Adventure of a Lifetime

By: plutosapphicstay

"So what do we say, boys? One epic road trip?"

One by one, they all agreed. But nobody could have imagined what it would have in store for them.

In fair Eldritch lies the motel of Levanter, home to Stray Kids, one of many covens in an enchanted world. The boys we know and love, all piled together in one fantastical found family:

Chan, everyone's It guy/favorite vampire/owner of said motel.

Minho, a spitfire-sweet djinn with three Antichrist cats.

Jisung, a grunge spriggn/resident Peter Parker but with plants.

Changbin, a rockabilly demon who hell couldn't contain.

Hyunjin, a punk siren who will blow the roof off your house with a Toxic medley.

Felix, a sunshine angel who exceeds the definition in every way.

Seungmin, a pastel werewolf with a saltier bloodstream than the Dead Sea.

Jeongin, a manic pixie gumiho who's just there for the shenanigans like all the rest of us.

But when they do decide to go outside (for once) for a fun road trip, it ends up being the most magical, heartfelt, absolutely batshit thing ever: the adventure of a lifetime. I'm glad I could share it with you.

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Pilot - Dancing in the Moonlight

Chapter 1: Pilot - Dancing in the Moonlight

Here, I give you just the beginning.

Dancing in the moonlight,
Everybody's feeling warm and bright,
It's such a fine and natural sight,
Everybody's dancing in the moonlight...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eldritch, Oregon - Present

The car trundled up the dirt road, snapping twigs and burying rocks under the wheels. Its bright red color stood out like a stop sign in the dark, out of sorts and out of place, moonlight shining overhead. With every tree it passed, it delved further into unknown territory- leering branches and spying shrubs and nosy little brambles, hopeful to get a peek of the poor wanderer.

On the roof, the vampire watched its approached, cloaked by shadows and gray shingles that made him unnoticeable to the human eye. Or any eye, really- there were few that could notice a creature of the night in his element when it wasn't too late.

He grinned down at the lost soul, lifting the walkie talkie to his lips.
"Action."

This had to be some sort of joke.

That's all Jeremy thought it could be as he stared at the old motel. *Levanter*, the sign read; electric neon cursive, buzzing cobalt blue. The walls were smooth gray stone, crawling with some kind of flowery vine. The windows - three on each side of the wooden door, six above - were all shuttered, not a hint of life behind them. It didn't look like anyone had set foot in it for years.

He checked address for the third time. *Eldritch, OR 44195*. Yup, this was the place. So why did it feel like he was being duped?

Maybe it was what Shawn had said twenty minutes before he left: that it was haunted. That some creepy wackjob lived there. That every delivery boy who'd ever knocked on the door never came back the same.

"What the hell," Jeremy muttered, hefting his bag. "If I get mugged, I've got a story to tell." Besides, it wasn't like whoever lived here wasn't the only person ever to order Chinese at seven thirty at night.

Still, he jolted as a wolf howled in the distance, like something out of a goddamn horror film. If any of the boys saw, they would have never let him live it down.

But the weirdness kept growing with every step he took. In the small glances he dared at the woods, there seemed to be little eyes staring back- fireflies, he told himself, just *fireflies*. Yet if those were just fireflies, then what would explain the rustling bushes? *Maybe bunnies like the smell of stewed ox tail?*

That was when he heard the singing, like a tinny music box in the corner of an abandoned nursery:

*"Got a secret, can you keep it?"**

"Swear this one you'll save,"

"Better lock it in your pocket,"

"Taking this one to the grave,"

Guess someone was living here after all.

By the time he reached the door, he was clutching his bag with an iron fist. His hands were shaking the way they did when Ms. DeBritton sprung out a math pop quiz. *Surely seventeen is too young to die?* "Pull it together, stupid." He wasn't going to *die*. He was just another basic white boy trying to live. This was a Portland town- of course it was weird. *Just get it over with.*

Jeremy rung the doorbell and held his breath for whatever Freddy Krueger-Norman Bates lunatic awaited him on the other side.

The guy who answered the door fit neither of those descriptions.

He looked like some Asian version of a twenty-something Ponyboy, with a messy greased-up black undercut and blue jeans. He was a head and a half shorter than Jeremy, which was comforting, but the arms pushing out of his white t-shirt looked like they could bench a decently-sized minivan, so he didn't let himself get too relieved. "You here for the delivery?"

"Huh? Oh- uh, yeah." Quickly, Jeremy brought out the contents of his bag. "Here."

"You look like you just saw a ghost." Greaser Guy's round features lifted into a friendly smile. "Something spook you on the way here?"

"Nah, it's just this place." But the guy accepted the food without batting an eye. "Is it normal? Around here, at least?"

"In Eldritch, you get used to it. You new here?"

"Yeah. Just moved in with my mom a couple months ago. Every time I think I've gotten a little used to it, there's always something that jumps out at me."

"Kinda how it is." Just as he was reaching for the tablet to write his pay, Greaser Guy's brows furrowed. "What the hell is that?"

"What?" Jeremy whirled around. The back of his car had been opened, and a bushy tail stuck out from the trunk. "Hey! Get out of there! Scram!"

He ran to shoo the creature away. By the time he got there, the creature was gone, leaving nothing but another annoying rustle of the bushes behind. Thankfully, from what Jeremy could see, nothing had been stolen. "Damn *wolves*."

"You alright?" Greaser Guy had lingered by the doorway, just out of the light.

"Yeah." Jeremy straightened back up, tablet in hand. "You ready to pay, sir?"

"Uh." The guy glanced uneasily at the ground before him. "I don't know about that."

"What?"

A thrush of wind from behind. Jeremy turned around to see a bright white flash of fur darting in and out of the bushes, too fast to even make out a shape. It seemed like the singing had gotten even louder.

A cry of pain drew his attention back to the door. The guy had now crumpled to his knees, head hanging, grasping the doorframe with one hand for support. "Whoa, dude, you okay?"

He looked up.

Every inch of his eyes were pure black.

"What the *fu*-"

The ground jerked under his sneakers, making Jeremy stumble back. It lurched again, left and right, like the roots below were

moving the plates. *An earthquake*, he managed to think before he tripped on a wrong step, tilted his balance off-kilter, sent him falling ass in the ground. The eyes in the bushes had started flickering, multiplying all around him. The singing had risen even louder, asking in raging demand if he could keep a secret. Even the house, the windows, which had seemed so lifeless were lighting up, glowing, blazing a blinding white, like a star had burst inside. "*What's happening?*"

"Didn't I tell you?" Greaser Guy had pushed unsteadily to his feet, grinning. It was nothing like the smile he'd shown him before- it was the smile of a madman, of a person who loved nothing more than to see the world collapse at his feet. "You get used to it in Eldritch!"

He moved with staggering ease over the rumbling earth. "The thing is, you don't know this place yet. You don't know the rules. How to *survive*."

Out of the bushes, the same shade of the blinding light, sprang the wolf. Fangs bared, eyes focused, ready to pounce.

"So as someone who does, I suggest that you..." His head dropped to the side, cocked with his eerie smile. "Run."

The wolf *roared*, and Jeremy scrambled to his feet, threw open the door and started the ignition before he was even fully in the driver's seat. He peeled around and booked it as fast as he could off the roiling road to the sound of maniacal laughter, screeching spectral music, and, as he turned the corner, the unshakable vow to *never* take Mario's shifts again.

"And *cut!*"

Changbin dropped the act, doubled over in an exhale. "Jesus *fuck*, I didn't know how much longer I could keep that up."

Jisung whooped and kicked out of the bushes, fists in the air, spring-colored eyes shining, blue hair looking like it had been blasted with a leafblower. "Free food!"

All at once, the light dimmed and ground stopped rumbling and the house broke out in cheers, breaking its spooky façade. One by one the culprits slipped out of the trees, opened windows and rolled out of bushes to greet their victory.

"You did great- all of you." Chan vaulted over the roof and in his all-black uniform and skidded over the tiles, landing soundly on his feet. "Hyunjin, you sounded amazing!"

Hyunjin beamed through his open window on the top floor, ocean eyes glimmering with pride. "What can I say? I have the gift."

Jeongin shook out his fur, shocked back into human form. The only remainder of his previous transformation was his snow white hair. "I didn't even fall over that time! But he did call me a wolf, *that* was particularly insulting."

"Is there anything wrong with that?" Seungmin jumped out of the maple to the left, every inch the scruffy werewolf boy he was. "I swear, if you guys make me howl *one* more time- "

"Oh, Seungmin, stop complaining, it was already old the first time," said Minho, scooping up the takeout abandoned in the entrance. In spite of having fabricated a star in the middle of their home, his deep violet hair looked miraculously tame. "Looks like we actually got everything tonight."

Felix pulled the black hood off of his blond head, slipping out from behind the shadows of the trees and fading the lights in the bushes with a wave of his hand. He looked out in the direction their delivery boy had driven. "He got out faster than the last one. Hope we didn't traumatize him too badly."

"We tipped him enough before he even got here. Nothing a group chat with the boys and a few theories won't fix. Now wash up and help set the table for dinner."

Obediently, they shifted into a haphazard single-file through the door. Chan couldn't help but shake his head in amazement. "They're never that compliant when I ask."

"That's because you're too soft on them," Minho told him, ruffling his dark curls. "You're the bark and I'm the bite- we balance each other out like that."

Chan sighed, looped an arm around his waist. "What would I do without you?"

"Chan!" Felix's voice called. "Berry ate another junebug!"

Minho smiled apologetically at his groans. "I can fill you in later," he promised, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Now come *on*."

Levanter, rather than being a simple brick of an establishment, was structured like a ring. The entrance lead directly to a registration office, which lead to a small courtyard, the heart of it all. The inner walls were adorned with years worth of morning glories*, and the courtyard grass bubbled with a colorful variety of meadowflowers. The occasional weary traveler was allowed to come and go as they pleased, but to the coven of Stray Kids it was more than just a resting stop. It was home.

"Find anything interesting in the trunk, Jeongin?" Chan asked, taking a mountain of plastic bagged containers off the kitchen counter.

"Only an extra work shirt," Jeongin replied, examining his nails. "I mean, I didn't expect a bodybag or anything like that, but it was a bit of a letdown."

"He was a kid working a delivery job in a town he'd hardly been in for more than eight weeks," Seungmin summarized behind him. "What

did you think you'd find?"

"Oh, Seungmin, have some optimism! The human race is full of surprises. It's why they're so entertaining."

"And so annoying." Still, when the gumiho poked his cheek, he bit down a smile before shoving him off.

Rather than using the stairs like any reasonable being, Jisung unleashed a vine out of the sleeve of his jacket with the flick of his wrist and used it to harpoon himself over the railing of the top floor catwalk. It was a thing.

Minho held up an envelope to him from below. "Another one for you, Mr. Popular."

Jisung snatched it up. The material was a green sheen, leaflike and veiny. "*Motherfucker.*"

"That's the fourth letter in three weeks," Chan noted.

"Just Irene inviting me to join her freaky nature cult." Jisung crumpled it in his fist and chucked it back down. Minho lit it dutifully ablaze through a finger gun that shot out a star. "If I see her again, I'll tell her thanks, but no thanks." Brushing the dirt off his shoulder, he continued on to his room. "This spriggan's not being tied down to anyone."

Well, upstairs wasn't really where his room was, yet it might as well could have been- it was where he held a special little hospice for any living creature who needed a helping hand.

But before he could even make it to the door, Hyunjin's was thrown open, sending him headfirst into billowy clouds of steam. "Ack-Hyunjin, what the hell?"

"Jisung." He waved a dismissive hand through the vapor, making it vanish immediately. "Didn't see you there."

"Course you didn't. Do you have any idea how many ecosystems you just killed using that much electricity?"

"I didn't use *electricity*- there was a leak in my shower and I fixed it."

Jisung nodded. "By blinding yourself even more with gas. That makes total sense."

"Even *more*?"

"Just an observation."

Hyunjin glared at him through the thin mist that still remained. "Are you this obnoxious on purpose?"

"Only because you are too."

The siren smirked, patted his cheek. "You really don't want to like me," he murmured, subtly swiveling Jisung's head around to watch as he passed by, red hair streaming behind.

The spriggan stood there, gaping, spluttering. "Wha- *what*- I *don't*, I- *urgghh*." Jisung stormed after him, readying another comeback.

The pair marched right past Changbin and Felix, who didn't notice them either. While Changbin was taking his chances on the catwalk, Felix was ambling easily by his side on the rim of the bannister. "I meant to say, you look extra1950's greaser today."

Changbin chuckled. "Felt like putting in the effort." He hesitated, letting a beat pass before adding, "Plus I had a date earlier."

"Oh? How'd it go?"

"Bust. He spent half of it asking if he should give up his ex-girlfriend's cat."

"That's too bad."

"Careful, Felix, he might think you mean it," Chan called up teasingly.

Felix pulled a definitely stolen hag stone out of his hoodie pocket and threw it at Chan. Changbin watched warily as he took another step. "You should probably get down before you fall."

"Come on, it's not like I'll die."

"Yeah, but you can still break a bone or something."

"Well, I like to live on the edge." He bent to grip the railing, maneuvering so that his Docs found footholds between the bars of the balusters, leaning back against open air.

Changbin pivoted into the space before him, careful to keep a distance. "I think you *like* making me worry about you sometimes."

Felix grinned. "Tell me about it, stud."

He let go of the handrail, and Changbin surged forward in time to watch him land on his feet, joining Seungmin and Jeongin in setting the table.

Changbin stared after the angel. "Stud," he muttered, breaking into a smile as he sounded it out. "I *like* that."

"I bet you do," Hyunjin sniped, pulling him dopily along.

Along with the beaten-up sofa, the table was a staple to the courtyard- a Lazy Susan roundtable given as a gift by a qilin whose couch Chan had helped move back in the 60's. Every night it would be crowded with food: takeout, leftovers, or the blessed times when Minho or Felix stepped up to make dinner. The tray was spinning constantly, shifting from hand to greedy hand as the conversation endured.

"Soonie's in my seat again," Seungmin complained.

"The laser pointer's by the salt," Minho replied, taking his own empty seat.

Chan grimaced as he plucked a tail out from between the egg drop and the shrimp. "Jisung, please inform your rats to clear the table *after* we've left it."

"They're not rats, they're field mice," Jisung corrected, holding his hand out for the one that had been caught. "And don't pick up Franklin like that- he's afraid of heights."

"I thought that was Adeline," Felix mused.

"Adeline has the twisted ankle, Franklin choked on the marble. Though I think he looks more like Darby." He set the mouse on the grass, blinking innocently at the bewildered looks he received around the table. "What?"

"Why is it that you feel the need to pick up every hurt animal you find?" Hyunjin asked.

"That's not true *all* the time."

"You tried to take home that snapping turtle by the creek *after* it bit you," Seungmin pointed out.

"... they're just called trust issues."

"Hey, who only left half a roll?" Changbin shouted over the table.

"I'm eating the other half, you want me to put it back?" Jeongin asked, mouth full of beef.

Felix cackled. Chan snuck a look to his right at Minho. "What was that you said earlier about us being a civilized coven?"

"You're the one with the maternal gene, not me," said Minho absently, cooing sweetly at Doongie under the table.

A half smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. Nonchalantly, he slipped a hand in his pocket and produced the hag stone. "I believe this is yours?"

Minho turned, gasping as he snatched it up. "I've been looking everywhere! How'd you find it?"

"Let's just say it struck me in the nick of time."

His eyes flicked to the tiny light bruise just below his polo sleeve. "Didn't hurt too bad, did it?"

Chan winked. "It'll fade." He switched his attention back up above the table. "Nine rings, Bin, slow down, you're gonna choke."

The demon swallowed his huge bite and flashed a smile. "Death can't get to this guy."

"Hey, don't feed him scraps!" Hyunjin hissed at Jeongin, who was reaching under the table. "I *told* you Kkami's allergic to tofu."

"Sounds kind of like a you problem," Jeongin retorted, but settled for scratching the dog's head.

Jisung took a long drink of green tea, exhaled theatrically. "Nothing tastes better than the spoils of war."

"Taken from the hands of a high school senior," snarked Seungmin.

"Another one bites the dust."

Chan pointed at him. "Fucking *love* that song."

"Which road will he take?" Felix addressed the table. "Theorist or redneck?"

"My bet's on redneck," Changbin put in. "He told Jeongin to '*scram*.'"

"Oh my God, wait." Jeongin swallowed, drooped a hand over his plate. "We were his awakening. We were his first introduction to the supernatural in this place. I love it!"

"Not like he was bound to stay ignorant for long," mulled Hyunjin. "Supernatural makes up half the population." In Eldritch, at least- it hardly took a genius to spot it.

"Yet we're still surprised about all the things some do to stay that way," said Minhø airily, swishing the drink in his own glass. "Which is why, even after all this time, it's fun to shake up their fragile minds."

"Just wish they didn't always need us to do it for them," Jisung muttered.

"Well, then what else would they do?" Jeongin looked down by his seat and picked up Berry. "Whenever we leave them unsupervised, they always go off and do something even worse, like Matthew Morrison, or Riverdale or N- NP- what's the thing, it starts with N."

"NFT," Chan offered.

"Yes! Thank you. It's like if someone doesn't strike fear into their hearts every once in a while, they just go apeshit."

"God stays in heaven because he too lives in fear of what he's created," Changbin quoted. "Didn't some guy in Spy Kids say that?"

"And it's still relevant," Hyunjin sighed. "I'm starting to think we need something to shake *us* up."

"I think I've got a suggestion as to how can we do that," Chan suggested offhandedly.

Offhanded as it was, the proposal turned their heads instantly, the knights of the Round Table facing their king.

"Are we robbing a bank?" piped Jeongin.

Jisung gasped. "Please say yes."

"Nope. Completely legal." The morale slumped over. "*But* it'll still make for a good time."

Felix shrugged. "Then let's hear it."

To his side, Minho cocked an eyebrow. "Hear me out." Chan splayed his hands over the table. "What if we went on a road trip?"

The words and their pitch took a moment to fully sink in. "A... what?" Seungmin asked blankly.

"Just a week or two out of town, seeing what's out there, just the eight of us. It'd be perfect."

Hyunjin scoffed. "Because sitting in a car for two weeks next to Jisung is my idea of perfection."

"Like I'd sit next to *you*," Jisung shot back.

Chan continued, unfazed. "Two weeks is nothing when you're immortal, Jin. We can all speak for that."

"But leaving town?" argued Changbin. "What would happen then?"

"We'd get Jamie and Yerin to watch Levanter. They're more than capable, what with the store."

"What about our children?" asked Minho. Not human children, of course- the ones that really mattered.

"They could watch over them, too." Hyunjin opened his mouth. "If I can trust Berry with someone else, Kkami will be fine too." Mouth closed. "As will Soonie, Doongie, Dori and Jisung's whole... collection."

"They will fend for themselves," Jisung said, with full confidence that they would. "Mother Nature is their patron, not me."

"Cool. Lit. Totally trust that." Chan glanced around the table for any flicker of assent. "So? Who's in?"

Somewhat unsurprisingly, they didn't all jump at once. "I don't know," Changbin murmured.

"Come on, just a little excursion," Chan pressed. "It'd do us some good!"

"The world changes all the time- we don't know what's out there," Hyunjin added. "And what we do know isn't exactly good."

"Isn't that part of the fun? We'd get to see new things, get over the old ones."

"Where did this idea even come from?" Seungmin questioned. "It all seems a little sudden."

Chan gasped dramatically, hand over his unbeating heart. "Is that the sort of man you think I am? Someone who acts before they so much as *think*?"

"That's not what I was- "

"After all these years, and still you expect the worst. Crushing my very soul with words."

"Are you trying to crush his soul, Minnie?" Jeongin asked mischievously.

"/- what?"

The gumiho grinned. "I thought I knew you," he whispered, leaning in next to his blushing seat partner.

Felix giggled. "You two are so cute it gives me a toothache."

Just as quick, Seungmin's flustered smile cramped into a scowl. "You want a toothache, I'll rip them right out of your gums."

"No violence at the table," Minho warned.

Chan sent him a sideways smirk. "No maternal genes?"

"Quiet."

"I think it's a good idea," Jisung vouched. "The world might not be as completely fucked up as we think it is."

"Thank you!" Chan high-fived him around Jeongin's back. "Someone agrees with me."

"It's not like we ever have anything else going on," said Felix, adding in a second vote.

"Where would we be going, anyway?" Hyunjin inquired, more for the hell of it than actual curiosity.

Chan's dimples twinkled below his eyes. "The edge of the world." Their faces remained perplexed, unimpressed. "Not just some place with the name- the actual Earth, except. Well, the edge of it."

No one seemed willing to believe him. "The edge of the *world*?" Changbin repeated. "How does that even exist?"

"Legend has it that it was the first place that split apart after Pangea started. Ran a crack that rings all the way around the planet to this day. But nobody really knows for sure."

"What is it?" Minho queried. "Some kind of island?"

"A cliff, supposedly- there's a veil around it, so humans can't find it - but once you look over it, there's nothing but cloud for miles up and down, at least until you hit some kind of ocean."

"And how do you know this is even real?" challenged Seungmin.

"You guys remember Peniel, right?" The coven nodded. "He and BTOB have been there themselves. Told me all about it, when I

didn't believe them myself. Gave me a map, coordinates, even picture evidence." They straightened up in their seats. "Which I'll only show you if you agree that a couple weeks' worth of one adventure of a lifetime isn't a waste of time." They dropped back again, rolling their eyes. "So what do we say, boys? One epic road trip?"

Levanter's inner courtyard went silent for a good, thoughtful period of time. Not even a field mouse dared interrupt it.

The boys exchanged glances, a wordlessly conferring jury, before Changbin broke out of it with, "Well, hell. Now I have to see if you're kidding."

"You had me at road trip, Chan," Jisung promised.

"Should I make brownies for the car ride?" Felix pondered.

"If you do, I'll go just for that," Seungmin told him.

"It's been a while since we had a proper adventure," Jeongin acknowledged.

Hyunjin rolled his eyes. "Only if I get the AUX cord for three days."

Jisung eyed him, smirking. "Scared, Jin?"

"You wish."

Chan whirled around hopefully to his boyfriend. "Minho?"

The djinn cast a long, extensive survey of the monsters seated expectantly around him, saving the vampire at his left for last. The last few bits of anxiousness in his gaze crumbled away as he responded, finally: "Why not."

Chan released a soft breath of relief, and the coven applauded in approval. Minho accepted it graciously, waving it off, batting away the paper straw wrapper Changbin shot at him.

"If this really is happening, then we all need to get some rest," he announced, rising out of his seat. A smirk curled along the edge of his mouth. "So if you'll excuse *us*." Minho pulled Chan up with him. "We're going to carry this on in private."

A flash of light blended with shadow, and they stepped out of frame and reappeared on the top floor in the open door of their shared room- Minho drawing a pleasantly startled Chan in by the front of his shirt and Chan closing the door behind them. A split second later, the opening to 34+35* blared through the walls.

"You might think I'm crazy,"

"The way I've been craving-"

"Oh, *God*," Jisung moaned into the night sky, echoed by the retches and wails of the others. *"Every fucking time."*

"Welp, I'm out of here." Changbin turned on his heel up the stairs. "If your headphones don't work, sucks for you."

"You do know that every time you do that, they think we're having sex, right?" Chan asked.

"Of course," Minho chirped, sweeping away into their room with his red kimono trailing after. "Why else do you think I do it?"

"So you have an excuse to play Positions?"

"So we can be left *alone*, smartass."

"Of course," Chan parroted, catching his eye roll as he followed behind.

All the bedrooms in Levanter were given the same modest setup- one king sized bed, vanity, widescreen TV, and a door that lead to the bathroom. But with the state they'd left it in for decades, it was

unrecognizable when compared to the other vacant ones. When you looked down, the gray shag carpets had been replaced with red that was prone to collecting tufts of cat and dog fur no matter how many times it was vacuumed. The plain cyan walls were decorated with paintings and post cards and trinkets from all the places they'd been. Combine that with the eggshell white-replaced-deep purple bedding *and* canopy, and the whole beautiful mess could have been summarized as Bohemian by anyone who wanted to be polite.

Minho was already at the vanity, pouring two cups of hibiscus tea because, as he'd told Chan multiple times before, a coffee machine could be multifunctional only if they were imaginative enough. "You never told me you wanted to go on a road trip."

That was one other thing Chan loved about Minho: he never bothered beating around the bush. "I thought it'd be fun thing for us to try," he responded, accepting his cup. "Do you not want to go?"

"Of course I want to go- hell knows I've been cooped up in this place for too long."

"So you didn't say yes just because the guys were watching."

"Please, you know I don't fall for peer pressure." Chan snickered into his drink. "I just wish you'd told me about it."

"Well, I- I didn't know if you'd think it was stupid or not."

"It's not stupid. You're stupid for thinking I would think it was stupid." Minho watched him laugh again, smiling apprehensively. "Stupid, no. But..."

Chan raised his eyebrows. *Here it comes.* "But?"

Minho leaned against the bedpost, eyes picking apart a piece of gray cat fur on the loveseat. "Do you really think now is the best time?"

His gaze had become moody, unfocused, the way it did when he was nervous. "I think now is the perfect time."

"After what happened? It's only been three weeks."

"And sitting around thinking about it isn't helping anybody. We need something to take our mind off it, to remind us it isn't all bad."

"But it's not *safe*." Minho met his eyes faintly. "You know what Zico said."

"You know I do." As if any of them had been able to forget. "Why do you care about that? He's gone now."

"I don't give a damn about *him*- I care about what he told us. About everybody outside of Eldritch, looking for us, all of it." Minho shook his head. "He couldn't have been lying."

"And maybe he wasn't." A tiny scoff puffed out of his nose. "But we can't just stick around here because we're *afraid*. Come on. We've never been afraid of anything. One yappy asshole isn't going to change that." Chan pushed off the wall, took Minho's hand and guided them onto the edge of the bed. "You've seen them, Min. They're restless. We *all* are. And I hate seeing you worry so much. Besides, Jeongin was right."

"About what?"

Chan nudged Minho's knee with his. "It's been a while since we had a proper adventure. It'll be fun."

Minho looked down in their cups, ruby-red liquid swirling in a circle. "And if we run into trouble?"

"We're the strongest coven in Eldritch. What could happen?"

For second he looked like he might zap him with cosmic energy- Chan *loved* that look. But even more he loved the crooked smile that

split slowly across his face, storm clouds giving way for sunlight. "I'll never know where you get that chronic sense of giddy optimism."

"I hope that means you trust it."

"It's managed to be accurate throughout the years."

And it won't fail us this time, Chan vowed. "So, my dear," he began, raising his cup. "How would you feel about a road trip to the edge of the world?"

Minho raised his in reply. In the glittering moonlight, the tea looked like blood. "Nothing would please me more."

Dancing in the Moonlight - Toploader

*Secret - The Pierces

*34+35 - Ariana Grande

*This section will also be reserved for Flower Symbolism bc trust me there's a lot.

Morning glory: Strength, giving a person the power to realize their hopes and dreams.

Also if anyone has any questions about what monsters are mentioned (there are So Many) just leave a comment!

+ for sexualities, 3Racha is bi, DanceRacha is gay, Vocalracha is demi/ace!

+ finally, the Main Character Fits

Chan: Black polo, ripped black jeans, curly/wavy hair because his hair has to Breathe, black fucking Nikes

Minho: Red ornate kimono, black dress shirt, swoopy neat purple hair, dark grey jeans, black lace up boots (basically the Back Door fit lol)

Changbin: White t-shirt w/ rolled up sleeves, bright blue jeans, pomade mussed hair, occasionally taped hands, red Chucks

Felix: Black hoodie, maroon skinny jeans, loose long hair, 10th Doctor converse

Hyunjin: Loose black tank, ripped dark blue jeans rolled up, hair down top part tied up, belt chains, high socks w/ yellow Docs

Jisung: Green/black flannel denim hoodie, black t shirt, floofy hair, grey jeans, indigo glitter Docs

Seungmin: Purple and white striped shirt, black belt, blue jean shorts, neat fluffy hair, light brown hiking boots

Jeongin: Red long sleeve sweater, white collar poking out, got that messy Swoop goin, olive green marker/paint stained pants, goth pink platform shoes

Sunshine

Chapter 2: Sunshine

Game day, baby. In this chapter, we're taking off!

You're like a sunshine, only giving good vibes

Any-anytime that you roll in,

Pullin' me out, never lettin' me down, and I wanna make sure you know it...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chan awoke to the face of a cat.

Well, Doongie, to be specific. If Minho had heard him refer to one of his pets as simply 'a cat,' he would have thrown seventy-five years out the window and killed Chan right there. Which would have been possible had he also been awake.

"Morning," Chan murmured groggily up at her. There was already cat fur on his hoodie.

Doongie, perched on his chest, narrowed her eyes. No amount of time would ever make them fully trust anyone but Minho.

Gently setting her on the edge of the bed, he pushed himself up and stretched, careful not to wake the man next to him. By the time he'd blinked into full consciousness, he could see Soonie and Dori seated patiently on the floor beneath, gazing up at him with the same empty eyes. *It's like they think I killed him.*

There were no windows for sunlight to filter in through, but sewn on the roof of the canopy were glowing golden threads that made up a tapestry of constellations- Orion, Ursa Major, Pegasus, Libra and Scorpio shining through day and night. Through their muted light, he could see the faint outline of the teacup set they'd used the night before from Chinatown in San Francisco, the Murano glass flowers from Venice stored in a blue vase, the ornate mughal dagger from India propped against the vanity.

But what drew his eyes was the deep red rolling suitcase at the foot of the loveseat next to his black one, upright and fully packed.

No way could Chan let him sleep now.

He looked down at Minho, who had made the mistake of rolling over to face his side of the bed. Finger gun out, he poked his cheek. "Hey."

"Mmmh."

Another poke. "Hi~"

"Nnnnnngh." Minho swatted his hand away like he was in slow-motion, stubbornly keeping his eyes closed. "What do you want, you evil creature?"

"Just to see your beautiful face."

"This early?"

"It's eight in the morning."

"Early. At least let me appreciate one full night of sleep."

"Well, you must've woken up once to pack."

Finally, he met Chan's gaze, all sleep-soft hair and dark eyes full of hatred. "Is that what this is about?"

Chan whipped out the smile that had always prevented him from any potential ass-whooping. "There he is!"

Minho glowered, but no hand was raised. Grudgingly, he pushed himself up to sit beside him. "It was only because Dori woke me up. She'd caught one of Jisung's rats and brought it to me as a gift." Dori was now licking her paw like it had been a lifetime ago. "I set it free back outside, saw my bag open, and decided 'what the hell?'"

"I must've underestimated your enthusiasm."

"It was only because I didn't want to be the one scrambling to get all my shit ready when it was actually time to go. Assuming that's still the plan."

"That, it is. D'you think they'll still want to go?"

"They were pretty excited about it, last I checked. Except maybe Hyunjin." Minho chuckled softly. "It'll be nice to go somewhere we've never been before."

"In all of our many years of wandering," Chan said proudly. "Think about it- it's something we'll actually get to say! That we, Stray Kids of Eldritch, went to the *edge* of the *world*. Best bragging rights ever."

"You're sure excited about this."

He faced his boyfriend challengingly. "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

Minho's mouth curved upwards. "Not yet." He flicked a loose lock of hair out of Chan's face. "But I always leave room for the future."

Eyes still on his, Chan's hand curled around Minho's thigh and swung him fiercely onto his lap, both giggling as Minho wove his arms around his neck, tapping their foreheads together. A delightful morning indeed.

- and then Jisung burst through the door. "Guys!"

"*Context is not an option*," Minho and Chan told him in practiced, deadpan unison.

"Oh, no need for that." Jisung wavered in the doorway, nervous laughter puffing from his smile. "First of all, hi-"

"Jisung, just spit it out," Minho cut him off.

"There's a fire-"

"Oh, my *God*," Chan muttered as he and Minho scrambled to their feet and out the bedroom door.

"Obviously we didn't mean for it to happen." Jisung's rambling lead them out of the motel room and pacing down the catwalk. "I was just scrolling through Pinterest and I saw a recipe for deep-fried Oreos and I thought-"

"That was your first mistake," Minho sniped, pulling down his sweater.

"- can't be *that* bad, I mean people do this shit all the time. But then I guess I let the oil go too long, and I tried pouring water over it-"

"*Never* do that!" Chan exclaimed.

"Is this the part where I say good morning?"

"This is the part where you pray *very* hard that I'm feeling generous enough not to burn a hole through the room your wall and let those two pigeons you've been keeping escape," Minho hissed. "Get the fire extinguisher out of the storage room."

"Got it!" Jisung leaped over the railing and took off into the storage room faster than any cartoon roadrunner.

Chan turned back to Minho, let go of an exhale. "Well, that was unexpected."

"Was it, though?"

"No." He ran a fretful hand through his hair. "Crap. Okay. If they wake up now-"

"If they aren't already and are just choosing not to come out."

"- Jeongin'll want to film it, and Felix'll probably want to roast marshmallows, which means our entire kitchen will burn down if we just leave it to Jisung."

"Obviously, we can't have that."

"You handle the fire, and I'll wake up the boys?"

"Deal."

"Good morning." One quick kiss, and they were off.

Hyunjin's room was diagonally across from Chan and Minho's, and he felt secure enough in his home and coven to keep the door unlocked, giving Chan the easy ability to burst through at any given moment, just like this one.

Once inside it, he kicked open the bedroom door and the siren shrieked from under a burrito of blankets and dropped his phone. Kkami shot up from his own little designated place at the edge of the bed and commenced to yapping furiously. "What the *fuck?!*"

"Have you packed yet?"

The interior was painted a serene seafoam blue and covered wall to wall with posters of rock bands both classic and modern, Billie Eilish, obscure romance dramas, and his own landscape artworks, rough brushstrokes and violent, vibrant color- even now, an easel of a half-finished garden scene stood beneath a ceiling light. Nowhere to be seen was a carry-on of any kind.

Chan's question made Hyunjin no less flabbergasted by his entrance. "For what?"

"The road trip!"

"I didn't know that was happening today!"

"Well, hurry it up, then! Jamie gets here at nine fifteen!"

"Jesus, fucking *fine*." Chan whirled out of the entryway, and Hyunjin threw the covers over Kkami- both to keep him from attacking Chan and to shut him up. He'd barely managed to unearth an olive green rucksack backpack out from an unholy amount of oversized sweaters when the vampire poked his head back in.

"Wait, were you watching-"

"The Umbrella Academy, season two, episode five, yes I'm rewatching it, now *go*."

Good news was, the fire had been successfully put out, and Minho was now getting started on breakfast. Bad news was, Jisung was put to the task of waking one sleeping Seungmin, who was famously grouchy when he was woken up. As his first floor neighbor and very caring friend, Jeongin was merely following the spriggan around to ensure that neither one of them got hurt in the process.

"- I'm just saying, you don't need to use the spray bottle!" Jeongin prattled after him, waving his arms. "If you think he's a slice of paradise normally, the water's only gonna make it worse!"

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Jisung said calmly, resting his finger over the trigger. "If I die, set my tenants free."

"That will literally not be my fault."

"Why don't you do it then? Wake up Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

"I am not above disabling your kneecaps in *any* form."

In the household of Levanter, Felix was one of the few who had actually packed the night before. But, given he'd celebrated such an accomplishment with binge-listening to & Juliet three times, he'd been found dozing halfway off the side of his bed.

"Don't worry about your brownies, there's like, twenty more in the pantry," Chan promised, helping him along over the courtyard.

"But they're better fresh," Felix murmured. "What if they go stale?"

"I don't know what you do, but those things could last through an atomic bomb. Literally my dream apocalypse rations. Now come on, Minho's making pancakes."

Felix groaned some more, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he trudged it off. Tilting up to catch his first glimpse of the morning sun, he stopped.

Upon seeing the back of a very shirtless Changbin picking up the hoodie he'd dropped out of the laundry the night before, there wasn't much else one could do.

Chan turned, saw, and dragged him by the arm the rest of the way. "Eyes down, loverboy, keep moving."

"Chan!"

If Felix had stuck around any longer, he might've seen Changbin look over his shoulder to see just where that voice had come from.

Unfortunately, even with his best attempts, Jeongin had been unable to keep Jisung from invading Seungmin's room without the spray bottle. Which meant when he threw open the door to his lilac-colored hideaway, with photos tacked up with movie and book quotes and song lyrics, he raised the bottle to the top of the bunk bed (the bottom was saved for his book and plushie collection) and at the

head of an already stirring Seungmin, whispered, "Say your prayers."

"The fuck," Seungmin mumbled.

"Jisung, *no!*" Jeongin cried.

Nevertheless, he sprayed him.

Seungmin jolted awake, cringing away from the water like a roly-poly and knocking it out of Jisung's hand. "*Agh- pwa-* what are you *doing?* Get away from me!"

"Rise and shine, Minnie!" Unfazed by his lack of a weapon, Jisung stood his ground. "Get ready to seize the day!"

While it certainly didn't make him happy, the spray bottle had succeeded in rousing him. "Seize the- how did you even get in my room?"

"I'm sorry, Jisung," Jeongin confessed. "It was that or let him break it down."

Seungmin groaned and tried to roll back into his covers. But Jisung was nothing if not one cheeky little shit, because he yanked him right back around- so fast, the werewolf had time to grab the plush Catbus and whap him full in the face.

"Ow!" Jisung yelled. "That hurt!"

"Please, you got hit in the head."

This such comment allowed for one of those early morning shouting matches that were always entertaining to watch from afar. Jeongin was the middleman looking helplessly on while Felix drifted amusedly into the open entrance. Changbin slipped into place next to him, holding out a family size bag of M&M's, which was gratefully accepted as the spectacle carried out.

Jisung was the first to forfeit. "I give up. I give up." He shook his head as he walked out. "Feral little *child*."

"Says the guy who made dino nuggets for a possum!" Once he'd left the vicinity, Seungmin slumped over on his side. "Why did you have to let him in?"

"I tried not to," said Jeongin pulling himself up to eye level with the railing of the bunk bed. "You know how he gets when he's on a mission."

"Lest any of us forget the times he actually is on one. Though the latest was reasonable."

"Just had to fill up the tray before we actually got that bonnacon out of 85°C." Seungmin propped himself up on his elbow. "Did you at least try to stop him from using that spray bottle?"

"Of course I did, what do you take me for? I even told him how to wake you up without getting you as mad."

"As mad?"

"Min, as near and dear as you are to my heart, with you, it's unavoidable."

"Then why do you put up with me?"

"Because it always wears off! It's like the gray skies in the morning before the sun comes out- you just have to wait a while." Jeongin smiled at him between the bars. "With you, it's worth it."

Seungmin's prickly demeanor softened like melted butter, warm and summer-sweet as he smiled back, only for a minute before Changbin and Felix started clapping and he flopped over hopelessly once more. "*Ugghh*."

Breakfast early in the morning with eight different roommates was always a particularly intimate affair- it was before anyone had fully made themselves up yet, decided how they wanted to face the day, who they wanted to be. It all took place in the one big main room (8 and 9 conjoined together) leaving no space for anyone to purposely but out Add that with vociferous clashing of all the different personalities crammed around one kitchen table, and you really had something special.

"I don't give half a shit what you kids do with your free time," Minho railed on, manning the stove. "But goddammit, Jisung, if I see you put any more peanut butter on your pancakes, I'm gonna knock you on your ass."

"You put chocolate chips in them, what else was I supposed to do?" Jisung shoved another bite into his mouth. "Peanut butter and chocolate's like, the best food combination ever."

Felix gasped and snapped his finger into a pistol at him across the table. *"Peanut butter-chocolate, great when separate-"*

"-but when they combine, they make the morning time epic."

"R double E-S-E-S yes-"

"I don't know about you guys, but peanut butter and banana's definitely better," Changbin put in over on the countertop. "The opinion needs to become fact."

"What about apples?" asked Jeongin on the floor. He'd taken to sharing some of his breakfast with Berry. "That's good too."

"You're all uneducated." Hyunjin swallowed his bite and gestured at the whole lot of them with his fork. "Peanut butter and *honey's* where it's at. Go ahead and fight me on it- I stand by my truth."

"It's all good- that's the point," Seungmin resolved. "Peanut butter's just the glue of food. As long as you put it with something, it'll taste

good. But eat it by itself, and it's just salty paste that makes your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth. Just don't eat it with celery, that stuff's nasty."

Chan stuck his head out of the dark top corner of the ceiling- yep, the *ceiling*. "As much as we all agree with that sentiment, I've got something else you guys might want to look over."

As the token textbook definition of a vampire, Chan often took it upon himself to clear up any rumors that had been curated over the years. For starters- no, his skin did not glitter under sunlight, he was just pale. No, garlic would not kill him, it would just cause a very bad rash. And no, the fangs weren't the only thing that came with the life of an undead sanguinarian. There was also the ability of, when carefully developed, shadow-travel, using natural darkness to move through solid barriers and come out where it was least expected. So no, the black clothing was not *just* simply for the aesthetic- it also happened to be very practical.

Seungmin and Jisung cleared out their plates to make space for the three manila folders Chan brought to the table. The rest of them crowded around to see what was inside.

"You wanted it, you got it," Chan announced. He flipped the folders open and revealed all the different contents: one had photographs, another had looseleaf papers with miscellaneous scrawlings, and the last was one folded up age-browned map. "Proof that where we're going is real. Peniel helped hook me up with it."

"How do you know these are all real?" Hyunjin plucked a photo out of the stack by random. "Wait- nope. They're good."

The picture he'd happened to select was a selfie of BTOB flipping off the camera with the most shit-eating grins in front of a cliff.

"The hell are these?" Jeongin picked a paper out of the second folder over Hyunjin's head. "I can't make out the words."

Minho gestured for it. "Give it here." His eyes flickered over the page, analyzing the language. "It's Sanskrit. This is dated all the way back from seventeen fifty-six."

"Which means that was written almost two-hundred sixty-seven years ago," Changbin added on. The guy had died and came back with a mental calculator in his head. "You sure it mentions any edge of the world?"

"Doesn't say the words exactly- just poeting waxing on rolling hills and a 'sea of clouds,' and things like that."

"That sounds almost exactly how this place looks," Felix murmured, waving the others over.

The photograph in his hands showed a scene that may have come from one of his paintings; the sky was delicate peach sunset, shades of orange fading into a quietly blushing red. On the fringe of the image was a grassy brink of a cliff, overlooking-

"A sea of clouds," Seungmin marveled.

"And it's right up our alley," said Chan. He snatched up the map, unfolded it out of fourths, and smoothed it out over the cleared space. "A round trip to Summerland limits- in mortal words, upstate New York."

"Plenty of great photo opportunities up there," Jeongin gushed.

"You bet. And if we follow the route up this way," Chan dragged his finger up the purple Sharpie path, "we should be able to make it in a little over a week. With necessary pit stops, of course."

"Naturally," said Jisung. "So, is this the part where we start getting our stuff in the car?"

"If only just to upstage Peniel's coven by making it there and back in a shorter time," Minho mused.

After each of them bid a tearful adieu to their pets and their rooms, it took a surprisingly succinct twenty minutes to get all their bags out the door and into the car- with a trunk compartment that Minho may or may not have TARDIS'd with an enchantment in order to make it bigger.

The car in question was by no means ordinary in its own right. A black SUV complete with air conditioning, emergency child locks, and six comfortably spaced seats, it was perfect for driving around eight chaotically mismatched monsters.

Jeongin 'lured' Seungmin into the backseat spot next to him with the promise of stolen brownies, and Jisung got the seat next to the gumihos with an agreement to watch every Studio Ghibli classic through the trip.

"Move your ass," Changbin grouched at Hyunjin, who was having a particularly hard time trying to navigate his steps through the cramped space.

"Move your head!" Hyunjin retorted.

Instead, Changbin reached up and shoved said ass into the seat it was intending to reach. The only thing that kept the siren from mauling him was the Felix in the spot between.

"Say goodbye to the house, kids!" Chan sang from the driver's seat as they pulled out of the pathway.

"Bye, house," the boys drawled, half sarcastically.

"Alright, first order of business." Minho twisted around in shotgun. "Who snagged the AUX cord?"

Grinning, Felix held it up. "You know what this means."

"Oh, yeah." Chan doled out a high-five to him. "Let's get this show on the road!"

Thus they peeled out of the woods to A Life in Color.*

"You tear my heart every which way,"

"A day with you will take away all of the grey,"

"Let's run away,"

About two years ago, Jeongin had made the coven a TikTok account named officialstraykids, run so that the supernatural community of 'monstertok' would be able to see their unfiltered day-to-day shenanigans. And, filmed or not, there was never a shortage of those.

In the first two hours, Jeongin already had footage of the entire car screaming along to Life Is A Highway-

" - I WANNA DRIVE IT ALL NIGHT LONG,"

"Jesus fucking *Christ*," Jisung wheezed with laughter.

- then Changbin getting out during traffic to give some of their food rations to a homeless man tanning on the side of the freeway -

"So what'd he say?" Seungmin asked.

"He said thank you," Changbin replied. "Then he gave me a dump cake in a Ziploc bag and honestly, I'm kind of living for it."

- then the rest of the coven stifling giggles at Jisung Spider-Man swinging up through the sunroof onto a Jesus Saves billboard to spray paint 'BITCH MCCONNELL' over it before the light turned green.

"Get in, get in, get in!" Chan screeched as Changbin helped him back into his seat. Even Hyunjin was unable to hold back a grin. The light turned green, Jisung blew off the tip of his canister like a smoking gun.

"He was a native Alabamian!" A bristly Southern accent howled from his red pickup. Needless to say, that was what got them fully explode.

Seven noisy hours later, seven o' clock at night, and the gang found themselves in a good old-fashioned In-N-Out drive through for some proper road trip sustenance.

The worker approached their car with bleary eyes and a deadened voice. "What can I get for you guys tonight?"

"He sounds like he got blown by a dementor," Felix whispered to Changbin, who snorted.

Chan was thankfully good at taking hints to keep it moving. "I'll get three number twos with grilled onions, two chocolate milkshakes and one strawberry, then one number three with lemonade, burger with no onions." He turned back to the car- right orders all around. "Where the hell are Jisung and Jeongin?"

"They had to go to the bathroom," Seungmin supplied.

"Why didn't I know?"

"They went out through the back, of course."

Minho jabbed him lightly with his elbow. "Chan," he whispered.

Quickly, Chan turned back to the employee, who was fading fast. "Sorry. I'll also have one grilled cheese and a Neapolitan, two more chocolate shakes, and fries. Animal Style."

"Stop fucking laughing, ChangLix," Minho hissed.

"Sorry, sorry!"

The worker recited their order with surprising monotone speed. "Anything else?" It was unclear if the question was automatic or bitter.

Either way, Chan flashed him a smile. "Nope. Thanks!" The minute he drove off, it disappeared. "I really don't trust those two out in the wild."

"Chan, while we all understand your worries, it's fine," Hyunjin reassured him. "As much as they talk, they're both too sweet to be any real danger to the public."

"Even Jisung?" Changbin asked smugly.

"You will not tell him I said that."

But the vampire was unconvinced. "Do I really have to remind you guys what happened at Souplantation?" A collective shudder ran through the car. "Never again."

"Well," Felix said lightly, "they'll probably be back when the food comes."

However, even when the boys had taken their dining to the parking lot, there was neither a Jisung nor a Jeongin in sight.

Seungmin spared a glance through the rear windshield. "What's taking them so long?"

The duo in question, was, in fact, still around the back of the building. While Jeongin was attending to nature's summoning in the bathroom, Jisung was waiting faithfully outside for him, humming one of his latest songs to the tap of his foot.

"That one's new," Jeongin noted as he stepped out the door. "What's it called?"

"Astronaut," Jisung replied, pushing off the wall. "With everything happening, I'm kinda feeling it right now."

"Will we hear it?"

"Still got some drafts to go through. But it'll be presentable soon enough."

"Can't wait."

As they were walking out, they paused as they rounded the corner, staring pensively up at the golden arrow. "Hey, Jisung?"

"Hm?"

"You agree with me when I say that I want this to be a memorable road trip for everyone, right?"

"Of course."

"Then you'll also agree with I think some memories don't make themselves."

"Got an idea on how to make one in mind?"

Positively shining, Jeongin tossed him a sidelong grin, one that Jisung slowly, knowingly returned, one that made whatever deity watching from their throne above whisper, "Oh, shit."

Back in the car, Kiss You* was playing at an almost muted volume. Changbin and Felix were slurping their chocolate shakes while watching The Great British Bake Off, Hyunjin was tapping his foot to the Billie Eilish song playing in his earbuds, Seungmin was pretending not to anxiously stare out the window, and Minho was mournfully scrolling through pictures of his cats.

Chan tilted back another swig of blood from his Nalgene. "I should go after them. Should I go after them?"

"I'm sure they're fine," Minho told him once more. "At the very least, we can trust those two to know their way around a drive-through."

"Or they're on the inside recreating Souplantation," murmured Hyunjin.

"Jin!"

"What? It's like their 'what happened in Budapest!' Literally everyone in this car has a Budapest!"

"And none would ever be able to be recreated," Felix chimed in.

"But *still*." Chan leaned back against the headrest. "What could be taking them so long?"

"There they are!" Seungmin exclaimed suddenly.

Everyone was craning out the window in seconds. And there they were indeed, running right at them.

Changbin squinted. "Wait."

Hyunjin's eyes began to flare wide. "Is that- "

Jisung opened the trunk, Jeongin threw in the neon golden arrow, and both of them hurtled into their seats. "Don't ask questions, just drive."

Chan's face was the definition of gobsmacked. "What the- "

"*DRIVE!*"

"*Shit*." In his hurry to restart the ignition, he fiddled with button after button, ending up dialing the music way past normal volume, and rocketed right over the the curb to the blaring bridge and chorus.

" - TO-O-OUCH, YOU GET THIS KINDA RU-U-USH,"

"What did you fucking *do*?" Minho demanded.

"Got something for the road trip hall of fame!" Jisung crowed, holding up the arrow like a trophy.

"Aww, you guys saved my fries!" Jeongin observed.

Changbin and Felix, whose earbuds had been split anyways, gave in to ridiculous laughter. Hyunjin toasted his strawberry shake at the backseat, and even Seungmin shook his head in affectionate disapproval.

"I hate *all* of you right now," Chan swore. But in Minho's helpless expression, in his *you-really-didn't-see-this-coming?* smile, he just chuckled and let the music play.

Because Felix had the playlist of a true road trip expert, it was able to keep the laughter flowing through several more streets, coated with sticky sweet milkshakes that switched hands and emptied themselves seemingly on their own. By the time the energy was drained and the sugar high finally wore off, the music mellowed into a fast-tempo lullaby that had them slouched back in their seats, against headrests and windows, eyes closed and hearts full.

Felix's snoring head slipped off its headrest and thunked on Changbin's shoulder- Changbin, who, up until that moment, had found the passing streetlights to be the most interesting view of the night. But as he switched focus back to the angel, peered curiously at his face to check if he was really asleep, and smiled, something soft and unseen and secret as he leaned on him in return and finally, *finally* closed his eyes.

Chan bit down on his own, looked away from the rearview window and back at the road. He would get to see their reactions tomorrow morning, when they both realized what they'd let themselves do.

In the shotgun seat, Minho dozed peacefully on his side, face soft and hair mussed and guard down. "Hey, Min."

"Hm?"

"*Min.*"

"What?"

"If I had a ring, would you wear it?"

This got him to blink his eyes open. "Huh?" Still half-conscious, he laughed. "Yeah, okay. Sure."

Chan nodded. When he was sure Minho was asleep, he snuck a peek at the engagement ring safely tucked away in his pocket.
"Good to know."

Sunshine - Liam Payne

*A Life in Color - Ramsey the Fourth

*Kiss You - One Direction

Nuestra Canción

Chapter 3: Nuestra Canción

Road trip shenanigans part 2. This time it gets a little more on the wild side.

Con flores,

Te llevaste mi tristeza, con colores,

Dibujaste la nobleza de la mano,

A tu lado creció nuestra ilusión...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Gandy, Utah - Present

It was said that the best road trips weren't about the destination, but the journey. That was bound to be true when your journey was wack as shit.

Three days since they'd first left Eldritch and taken the golden arrow of In-N-Out with them, and they had since taken one of them to uncover every known potato creation in Idaho while geocaching. The following highlight was when they bought an entire roadside diner out of chicken-fried steaks at the corner of Wyoming just to feed a family of bears they'd driven past by Devils Tower. Somehow, driving through the Southwest could actually be pretty fun when you traveled with the right company.

Memories were made at every turn, to the tune of Listzomania from Jisung's playlist: catching breakfast at a local cafe while Chan tried a different coffee cup at every one.

"Even if I can't eat, I can still enjoy drinks," Chan told them over a light roast cappuccino. "Tokyo Ghoul was ninety percent right on that part."

Shuttling off to Zion for the hell of it and skipping over stepping stones through a river:

"Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,"* hummed Minho.

"Sticking my dick in rotisserie chickens," Felix and Jeongin sang from behind.

Finally, ending the night with ice cream from a nearby parlor in a row on a sturdy telephone wire.

Jeongin shifted the camera focus from member to member. "Minho, what flavor did you get."

"Vanilla."

"Felix, what flavor did you get."

"Butter pecan."

"Changbin, what flavor did you get."

Changbin shook his head, refusing to answer.

"Jisung, what flavor did you- "

"Fucking MINT."

“God,” Changbin sighed into his hand as the others cracked up.

But of course, so much driving around had its drawbacks- which was how they ended up at a gas station.

Minho and Changbin were hanging back to get gas while the rest of the gang was inside on a snack run, which was considerably less tranquil than watching numbers tally up on a fuel pump.

“God, you’re a heathen.” Jeongin stared in disbelief at Seungmin, who was taking a box of Oatmeal Creme Pies off the shelf. “You actually *like* those?”

“Yeah.” Seungmin’s brow furrowed slowly. “Is there a problem with that?”

“Literally no one I’ve ever met likes those. You can’t barter them for anything!”

“Good- more for me.” He dropped them in their basket next to Jisung’s sour gummy worms. “Never was like other girls anyway.”

Thrown into the basket were several more abominations like muddy buddies, salt and vinegar chips, Sour Patch watermelons, Funyuns, and specifically left Twix because Hyunjin insisted there was a difference in taste.

They lined up in the chip aisle, going over any last minute purchases. “Anybody want anything else?” Chan called back.

“He’s gonna say it,” Seungmin muttered.

“Dude, don’t say it,” Felix pleaded.

“I’m always a slut for Doritos!” Jisung blurted.

Chan didn’t even roll his eyes. “Hit.”

It was a thing they did- whenever someone peaked in a special level of dumbass, there was a hit ordered on them which was carried out by the nearest member with whatever was in their hand.

Seungmin grabbed a bag of Fritos and passed down from Jeongin to Felix, who looked at the spriggan apologetically. "It's nothing personal."

"It's alright," Jisung whispered. "I forgive you."

And closed his eyes as he was whapped soundly in the face.

Meanwhile, Changbin was leaning back against the hood of the car. "Hey, Minh?"

Minho glanced up from the fuel pump. "What?"

"You still have the power to summon shit, right?"

"Elaborate?"

"Y'know, like, random shit, cool shit, like say- "

"A full gallon of gas so we can stop driving around to places like these. No."

"Come on, I have a point!"

"Which will not stick its landing on me. Changbin, you know full well I was only able to do that stuff while I was actually indebted to people to do it."

"But you're like Wanda Maximoff! Chaos magic, right at your hands! You can literally do so much- can you turn into a Venus flytrap? I'll give you twenty bucks if you do it right now."

"I don't need twenty bucks."

"Fifty."

"You don't *have* fifty bucks."

"Pleeease?"

"No."

Changbin opened his mouth for yet another compelling argument, and he heard it: a crash in the distance. Echoing from the other side of the building, airily making its way to them.

Minho took out the fuel pump, and Changbin bounced lightly off the car. "Okay," Minho started, "they're all inside, right?"

"Yup."

"Which means that was not a fucked-with air vent."

"Nope."

Minho's brain flicked between possibilities; it could have been one of many. "The wind does all sorts of weird shit."

Changbin swallowed. "Let's leave it at that."

The rest of the boys walked out the sliding glass doors, laughing at some dumb something that had happened in the station. Minho and Changbin were able to paste on smiles in time for their arrival.

"Min, babe," Chan managed through his. "As a man with more than a braincell, we can agree that gas station donuts the most un-theft-worthy items found in any gas station, right?"

"Given that none in the history of any gas station have ever been replaced since ninety-seven, I'd say that's true."

"See?" Jeongin and Jisung groaned. "I was right!"

"It's not about the *quality* of the item," Jeongin emphasized. "It's about getting away with the crime."

"And that is *also* a very valid point that can be reiterated in the morning." Minho sidled up to his boyfriend and slipped the car keys out of his pocket. "Let's go. I'll drive."

Immediately, that tipped him off. "Is something wrong?"

"Nope. Just tired."

Casually as they could, MinBin shepherded their fellow members into the car. There was nothing as they pulled out of the gas station, nothing when they took off on the open road again, when they left the twenty-four hour glare behind them. Then-

"Is that a cloud?" Felix asked.

The light of the moon had disappeared completely- their car had been covered with a cloak of darkness that snuffed out even their headlights.

Changbin stiffened. "I don't think so."

Chan cut a glance at his partner, who was already tensing up at the wheel. "Min-"

"Got it." Minho slammed his foot on the gas, and the darkness charged.

The boys lurched back in their seats at the sudden boost of speed. A massive clawed paw scratched at the rear window, and Jeongin screamed as Seungmin jerked him into his arms. Minho swerved to the empty right and pressed harder.

And then it was over. An angered screech, a gasp for air, a return into the light, and it was over.

Minho slowed down, returned to the left lane, pulled over off to the side of the road. "Is everyone okay?"

Finger by finger, Changbin released his grip on a pale-faced Felix's hoodie so the angel could tend to Hyunjin, who'd latched onto his arm. Seungmin abashedly unlocked his hold on Jeongin so the gumiho could look out the window to see if the threat was really gone, so Jisung fuss over both their pulses, ruffle their hair to make sure no one had a concussion-sized lump on their heads.

"Is that why you wanted to leave so fast?" Chan asked. "Did you guys see something?"

"Not see, but hear," Changbin admitted quietly. "Something from behind the gas station. A- A crash, it sounded like."

"We didn't want you guys to worry, so we didn't say anything," Minho finished.

Hyunjin exhaled shakily. "Smooth *fucking* sailing, I remember being said."

"Hey, we don't know what it was," Felix consoled. "It could've been anything- a bear, maybe."

"No offense, Felix, but I think we all know bears don't sound like that," Jeongin said, fighting to keep his voice level.

"It was just that one thing," Seungmin soothed, squeezing his shoulder. "We'll probably never even see it again."

"Yeah," Jisung piped, eagerly latching on. "Everything's gonna be okay."

Of course, because Jisung said that, everything went wrong.

"How is this possible?" Minho said incredulously. "I refilled this last night!"

They had pulled over to the side of an unruly forest- less than three hours of driving the next morning, and the engine came sputtering to a stop on an empty tank.

Changbin cleared his throat. "Y'know, Minho, this would be a very good time for- "

"Changbin, if you so much as *start* to finish that sentence, so help me, I will turn your teeth inside out."

"Can you even do that?"

"Do you really want to test me?"

"Maybe there was a leak," Felix suggested.

"There can't be." Chan shook his head. "I took it to the shop last week- there was nothing."

Jeongin gulped. "You don't think that... that thing might've- "

"No," Hyunjin said quickly. "It couldn't have. Claws like that can't open a gas tank door."

"But- but what if it's like me? What if it can turn into something else that can? What if - "

"Hey." Hyunjin braced his shoulders in his hands. "You're not gonna think like that, okay? Whatever that was last night, it's gone. And if it comes back, we'll kick its ass. I promise that."

Hesitantly, Jeongin nodded, taking his reassurance. "So, what now?" asked Seungmin. "We're stranded here?"

Chan split a glance at the empty fuel tank. "Well, given that I can't find the emergency tank at the moment, yes." Groans from the whole gang. "But, in the meantime, we should be able to look for shelter and-or possible resources."

"How? We're in the middle of nowhere."

Jisung, who had spotted his moment to shine, stepped up to the plate beaming. "Come on, I'm sure we could find something

worthwhile around here!"

"You better not turn this into some nature hike," Changbin warned.

"Binnie, my man, my beloved, I promise I will make this boring venture solely about getting us out of here."

Cut to fifteen minutes later:

" - and would you just *look* at this aster!" Jisung gushed, marveling at a bush. "I've gotta try growing some of this at home."

"We should play some trivia games to pass the time," Seungmin suggested under his breath, "because I want to Kashoot myself."

"It could be worse," Chan amended, stepping over a burrow. "We could be in the middle of Nevada- name one interesting thing you can find in a desert."

"A mirage induced by my own declining sanity."

"Mirages are fake and boring- this is *real*." Felix grinned up at the overgrowth, where glittering sprites hardly the size of hummingbirds fluttered in the treetops. "And it's better than sitting back in the car waiting for it to start."

Jeongin appeared in front of them, absolutely glowing. "Guys, come on! I found a rock that looks like a bat skull!"

"Should I ask how you know that?" Hyunjin queried.

"Nope!" Grabbing Felix and Hyunjin by the hand, he pulled them ahead down the path.

"There's always something to be found in places like this," Minho remarked.

Begrudgingly, Seungmin cracked a smile. "I guess I could give it a chance."

"That's the spirit," Changbin encouraged, throwing an arm around his shoulder. For once, he wasn't even pushed away.

Once they started showing real enthusiasm, Jisung seemed to feed off their energy. He whipped out his guitar to play an acoustic version of American Teen,* the melodic sound of his voice attracting creatures both natural and not. Jeongin shifted into fox form to squeeze into small places, climb and scare off bugs, and Changbin wandered off into his own little thicket of pink camellias*. Minho dragged Chan over to a bush of freesia*, going on about the book on flower symbolism he and Seungmin had stolen from Jisung's room while the latter pretended dreamily to listen. Felix and Hyunjin went chasing after frogs in a creek, and Seungmin diligently took pictures like any good road trip photographer.

"So wake me up in the spring,"

"While I'm high off my American dream,"

"We don't always say what we mean,"

"It's the lie of an American teen,"

"It just boggles my mind every day," Hyunjin raved. "Why, out of every creature in this universe, do humans choose to test on frogs? They use them for middle school dissections, for science, and don't even think about it! Like, what if it had a family? What if it had dreams? What if it never got to watch Parasite?"

"Concept: movie theater for frogs," Felix proposed.

"Fucking metal. But seriously, it's messed up! All they do is eat bugs that we hate and mind their own business. They're literally just vibing." At that precise moment, a bullfrog landed on the stone in front of him with a wet thump. "See? He heard me talking about frogs and came to see what's good!" Just as Hyunjin was reaching down to pet it, the frog hopped away. "Wait, come back!"

He rolled up his ripped blue jeans even more to run after, and Seungmin's psychic cameraman abilities made him turn just in time to capture the shot. Felix was almost laughing too hard to follow. "Jin, wait up!"

Felix pushed into a run after the siren, who was now trying the 'ps-ps-ps' method on his new amphibious friend. He'd only gotten halfway to him when he'd spotted, through a thrush of green leaves, out of the corner of his eye, a floating pink camellia. *The wind isn't that strong, is it?*

A glance over his shoulder, and he tiptoed out of the creek and back into the forest, where he now could see into the center of the thicket: Changbin, cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed, meditat- nope, not meditating, waiting. The flower, carried by a troop of sprites, joined with a crown of other camellias and wove into a complete ring, seemingly floating until it settled upon Changbin's head.

Immediately, Changbin's eyes opened, and he leaned over the little pond. "Hey," he murmured, smiling into his reflection as he adjusted to crown. "This isn't half bad." The sprites buzzed excitedly, and the demon giggled.

If it was just Felix, then he would have settled for covering his own stupidly huge smile with his hands and doing some embarrassing leaning against a tree at the cuteness. But because God hated him, He decided to create an extra special pothole for him to trip backwards on and fall on his ass.

Felix coughed, back on the grass, spitting a blue geranium* petal out of his mouth. Jisung tipped over him, acoustic guitar slung over his torso, grinning like a bastard. "That was so slick, right there."

"Shut the fuck up." But he accepted the spriggan's helping hand back onto his feet. They walked on beside the creek. "Did you even see how cute he looks right now? Literally what else was I supposed to do?"

"Maybe talk to him? You would've gone forwards instead of backwards."

"Because you're so good at talking to the guy *you* like."

Jisung scoffed. "I hope you're not saying what I think you're saying."

"You know I'm saying what I think you're saying."

The natural defensive eyeroll came into play. "Please. If it was like that, I'd tell you. *And* I'd be so smooth you wouldn't even know it." Felix smirked: *mm-hm*. "You have not seen my game in action. Cupid bends to my will- he *wishes* he could have it. I'm simply too good to- "

"Hey, Jisung!"

Jisung swiveled around and choked on his words.

They'd reached the zenith of the creek, which stemmed from a softly flowing waterfall. Contented bullfrog on his shoulder, Hyunjin stood in front of it, jeans rolled up to his knees, parting the curtain of the water with a dancer's fluted arm. The droplets that the crashing runoff stirred up swirled iridescent around him, controlled by his other hand, catching in his scarlet hair. "Would it be safe to swim in this? This is the first waterfall I've found outside of Portland with water pressure that won't kill you."

For a moment, Jisung recollected his entire thought process to remember his own name. "Uh." He had to clear his throat twice. "Well, I mean, probably not. This is Utah, after all, where like, one-third of the natural water gives you a rash the longer you spend in it. So you should probably get out now. It could be, um. Poisonous."

Hyunjin raised his eyebrows. "Poisonous water."

"Yeah." For some extra support, Felix nodded vigorously.

The siren glanced at his bullfrog, who very convincingly ribbited in his ear. "Whatever you say, buzzkill." Dropping his hands, he stepped out of the creek, the water resumed in its normal activity. "You know, you'd be a better guide if you could actually show people how to have a good time."

Deep under his breath, Jisung muttered, "I'd show you a thing or two."

"What?"

"I said that frog's the only thing in this entire forest that likes you!"

Hyunjin scoffed. He spun on his heel and left to go find his shoes.

Jisung sighed. He only had to peek at Felix's smug, all-knowing face for one second before he pinned his gaze on the treetops so some earthly deity could smite him. "Shut up."

"So slick."

Photo ops in an enchanted forest, were probably something that should have been selected sparingly, what with finite aspects like camera film and the social construct of time. But for Seungmin, the quality of the pictures didn't matter- it was the moments he could remember being captured inside of them that counted. Hyunjin talking to his new bullfrog (he'd named it Francois) on top of the bat skull rock. Jisung coaxing a lizard onto the head of his guitar. Felix and Minho fawning over Changbin's flower crown. Jeongin, having successfully scared a raccoon out of a hollow log, popping out of fox form and flailing back on the grass, rolling with laughter in the gaillardias.

As he caught his breath, the gumiho caught Seungmin watching from behind the lens. He waved wildly with his whole arm; Seungmin, caught in the act and utterly helpless not to, chuckled and waved back. Perhaps it was a moment he would keep for himself.

There was still enough film for about ten more shots. He turned around to keep moving the other way. Far away, barred by sporadically placed trees, Chan had his back to him, pacing back and forth through the white daffodils*. At this angle, he looked like he could have been the only man alive.

Seungmin hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but once he heard the words coming out of his mouth, there was no way to unhear them.

"... so should I just go for it? Just drop down and- no. *No*, what are you even *saying*? The speech is the most important part- he *has* to know!"

Carefully, Seungmin lowered his camera, inched closer to listen.

Chan tread forward, back out of hesitation, and forward again. "Okay, come on, you can figure that part out later. How're you gonna do it?" For a slight second, there was a bend to his knees, but it vanished. "Not now, not now. Just say it. Sound it out."

"Sound what out?" Seungmin whispered.

The man took in a deep inhale, and flushed it out as an exhale. He slipped a hand into his pants pocket, and Seungmin lifted the camera again, dialed up the focus, zeroed in on the ring. "Minho, will you-"

The camera crashed to the ground.

Chan whirled around on Seungmin, still gaping. The werewolf staggered back, already on his way to retreat. "I-I'm sorry-"

"Quiet." Grasping Seungmin's wrist- and his camera -Chan darted back into the grove.

"Jeez- what're you doing?" Seungmin jerked his arm away.

"What did you hear? What'd you see, what'd you-" Abruptly, Chan remembered himself, shrunk back. "Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No, not really, it's fine, but- the ring, the speech- what was that all about?"

He flushed a memorable shade- Hyunjin's hair kind of shade - of red. "Well... I wasn't planning on doing it here and now, but I guess, since you already saw-"

"*Oh my-*" Seungmin clamped his hands over his own mouth, forcing himself to swallow back his own excitement. "You're gonna *propose?*"

"Yeah."

"*Chan-* that's- that's *amazing!*"

"Even after seventy-five years."

"Don't talk yourself down, I've done it to myself enough times to recognize it." Chan smiled sheepishly. "When are you gonna do it?"

"Not too soon- obviously, I need some time to prepare everything."

"I figured that much out with the speech and the pacing." Another look: *touché*. "But I'm sure whatever it is, he'll love it."

"Hope so." Seungmin caught a tiny glimpse of a fang as he bit his lip. "And, Seungmin... no one else really knows."

"Chan, I may only have a bare minimum understanding of human things, but obviously this is important to you, so it's important to me too." Seungmin reached out and squeezed his hand in promise. "I won't say a word."

Chan squeezed back. "Thanks, Seungmin."

A trio of bloodcurdling screams cut through the otherwise sweet moment.

"Oh, *fucking* hell."

They ran back to find Changbin, Jeongin, and Hyunjin panting with their hands on their knees in front of the bat skull rock. "What happened?" asked Seungmin.

"The- The cave," Hyunjin gasped. "Rock is cave."

"It's his fault," Changbin pointed. His flower crown was furiously askew. "His fucking bullfrog- "

"Francois," Jeongin corrected between breaths.

" - *Francois* decided to jump out inside the rock, and we chased after it, at which point we found out that Jeongin's skull rock is a part-time cave-"

"And we heard the screeching," Jeongin concluded, barely more breath than voice. "The same as the one from last night. I know it."

Behind them, the bat skull rock/cave thundered from the inside, growls blowing down the grass and wilting the flowers. It was the indistinguishable echo of what had chased them out of the gas station the night before.

Minho swept them behind him and cracked his knuckles. "I'm gonna light it up so hard its skeleton glows." The skin on his palms already lighting up.

The growling drew nearer, and the boys dropped into fighting positions, summoned power from water they needed, locked eyes on the shadow outline that was slowly marching closer, slow-motion charging into daylight, until it was right in front of them and-

"What the *fuck*?"

The drop bear simply grunted response, as if to say, *I don't know either buddy*.

"The hell's a drop bear doing here?" said Changbin incredulously. "They've only ever been found in Australia."

ChanLix snapped their fingers into simultaneously timed peace-signs, not taking their flabbergasted eyes off the creature. Given that it looked like a giant koala, the drop bear was often reduced to a folk tale used to frighten tourists and presumptuous Boy Scouts. But, due to the presence of the one there and then, it was clear that that was another big tall fucking lie that people told their kids to get them to sleep at night.

"Hold fire," Jisung murmured. "I'm gonna talk to him." Dropping his hands to his sides, he stepped pass the invisible contact limit.

"Jisung," Seungmin hissed. "Jisung, wait, *Sung-!*"

"Hey, buddy," Jisung said, in a tender, cotton-candy voice soft as the flannel-denim hoodie he wore. "You're sure far from home- what're you doing here?"

The drop bear roared again, and Jeongin winced back. "Climate change? Oh, yeah, that's been happening a lot. Just last week, I saw a carbunclo in the park." This time, a grunt- almost surprised. "I know, crazy, right? So, you see my friends over there?" The drop bear looked. Unsure of what else to do, the boys waved. "You scared them quite a bit- mind telling them why?" Short grunt. "Oh. He thought you guys were backpackers."

"What..." Changbin started, but was shushed by Felix.

Jisung serving as the translator, it turned out that the drop bear *had* in fact followed them, but not for the reason they thought. At the gas station, he'd smelled their food- namely, the Dole whip in the cooler - and ran after their car not just for that, but because their fuel door had been left open (Minho pretended not to see their glares). He'd stolen their emergency gas tank because he had mistaken it for pineapple juice ("Oh, buddy, that's not good for anyone." - Jisung) and stayed in the cave in hopes of a nap.

"How's this for a deal?" Jisung negotiated. "We give you Dole whip-" Grunt. "-and pineapple juice, and you give us back our gas and let us

live?" There wasn't any real way to discern the grunts as good or bad, but given the way Jisung reacted, this one was good. "All right! Here's to character development!"

He held up his hand. The drop bear blinked its giant, soulless black eyes. "You don't know? That's cool, it's like this." He high-fived his own hand. In imitation, the drop bear clapped his own clawed paws. "Oh- no, not with yourself. I mean, you *can*, but it works better with someone else. Like this!" Positioning the paw in front of him, Jisung tapped it with his own. "Only with more force-it's cooler like that. Now you try!"

"He's gonna die," Jeongin realized.

There was no better way to describe what happened next than this: the drop bear reared back, wound up, and bitch slapped Jisung right into the sun.

"Team Rocket," Seungmin murmured, watching his friend sail headfirst back into the trees. "We're blasting off again~"

Jisung's body crash-landed in a heap of bushes, invisible and unmoving.

"Do we think he's gonna come back from that one?" Chan asked.

"Just give him a minute," Minho promised.

And they did- approximately thirty seconds passed before Jisung sprang up from the bushes, face smudged with dirt, clothes cluttered with leaves and twigs- but cheering and hollering like he'd never had such a blast. "*WHOOOOO!* That's what I'm *talking* about!" The boys couldn't help it- they had to laugh. "Let's do that again!"

He shot straight out of the foliage and ran zealously right back up to the drop bear, who seemed to be doing what koalas counted as laughing.

"Weirdo," Hyunjin snickered from afar, positively shining. He would keep laughing as Jisung went flying back again, as he got the others to try it out too, as he dragged Hyunjin by the hand to one trigger happy drop bear with no hint of filter.

When they relinquished their Dole whip and pineapple juice (not without some remorse from Jeongin) the drop bear gave them one last gift: shelter for the night. If one ventured deep enough into the bat skull cave, felt along the walls, and grabbed a lever, they would pull down a drawbridge into an abandoned temple, alight with only torchlight on silvery walls that outlined rows and rows of ancient books encircling what looked like some kind of medieval conversation pit.

"God, I hope humans never find this place," Minho prayed.

After getting sleeping bags from their car, the boys settled into the already premade pit and dug books out of the library with their eyes shut- Jeongin managed to unearth a poster of the one and only Glamrock Freddy with a John Clare poem written on the back while Hyunjin found a copy of Phantom of the Opera. It wasn't until after a reading of the entire play that they decided the best way to end their night was with a screening of one more musical.

"Mamma mia, here I go again,"

"My, my, how can I resist you?"

"The one case where the sequel is better than the first part," Jisung noted.

"Sshhh," the seven of them hissed. There was a high chance that they would all fall asleep before they even witnessed the glorious title number in Mamma Mia!, but Felix had already ran off with the flower crown from atop Changbin's head and placed it over Minho's, who's hid the smile on his face with his pillow. Chan and Jisung were singing along to the movie, and Seungmin wasn't even pretending to

read through it, so for at least a minute longer they could appreciate it.

"Yes, I've been brokenhearted,"

"Blue since the day we parted,"

"Why, why, did I ever let you go?"

Hyunjin gasped. "Francois, you're back!"

"FUCK-"

Nuestra Canción - Monsieur Periné

*American Teen - Khalid

*Mamma Mia - ABBA

*Pink camellia: Longing, specifically romantic longing for someone.

*Freesia: Friendship, trust, thoughtfulness and innocence.

*Geranium: Stupidity or foolishness.

*White daffodil: Purity, innocence, fresh starts.

Danger

Chapter 4: Danger

Road trip shenanigans part 3. I smell some bad blood coming our way~

Stay ,

,

Stay ,

It's my show time,

Danger...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Logan, Utah - Present

*"Forget it, I'll do it sometime,"**

"I'm locked up in the button,"

"Can't you do it sometime?"

"Pushed it in too far." Collective pause. *"Oh!"*

Most of their evenings on the road began like this, peppy wakeup songs and drowsy singalongs and whatever sorry excuse of a lunch that made up the first thing they grabbed out of their ration bags. But today, with savory wraps and Buttercup, there was already a little more structure than that.

Together, they grouped in for the chorus:

"Electrify my heart,"

"Electrify my heart,"

Hyunjin stared up at the ceiling. "Does anyone ever just take a moment to think and try to remember what Shaquille O'Neal actually was before he got cast in every ad imaginable?"

"Nothing could ever make us more grateful for your presence, Jin," Chan replied by reflex, turning on the left. "Every word you say is music to our ears."

"Cock."

"Beautiful."

Dirt on my leather was a rustic cabin-looking general store on the side of the road, where a row of about ten motorcycles lined the front and a pair of silver antlers hung in welcome above the entrance. Jisung cringed as he walked in beneath them.

"Don't worry, they're fake," the cashier said, obviously bored behind his desk. His nametag read Seungyoong over a green and black flannel.

"Slow day, maybe?" Jeongin murmured. Seungmin just shrugged.

The place was a delightful mix of what Minho would describe as rural country and cottagecore; a rack of naturally flavored honey jars would be found next to a pristine array of Bowie knives, while an entire wardrobe of olive green camouflage would point the way to a wicker basket of a variety of fresh tea leaves, grown specially by local farmers.

Chan reached for a package of botanical candles- they'd need some new fragrances at the bathrooms of Levanter anyways. At the same

time, his hand brushed a black leather sleeve. "Oop- sorry." But then his eyes followed it up to those of the wearer. "Oh, fuck."

Cue the dramatic guitar riff. "Well, I guess they just let anyone in here, don't they?"

Changbin looked up from the mushroom birdhouse he'd been eying and deflated. "Not this shit *again*."

"Nice to see you again, Taeyong," said Chan tiredly.

Lee Taeyong cocked his head in arrogant defiance. "Can't say the same to you."

Minho and Jisung appeared to pull him back, but the rest of the pack were already filing out of the aisles to flank their leader- Johnny, Jungwoo, until the entire unit of NCT 127 had fanned out right there, matching leather jackets and all, in front of the homemade candles.

The thing about NCT was that there wasn't just one of them- there were several, a strictly reptilian biker coven with units that ranged out as far as the Northwest and Southeast. Some of them were made up of the same members, but that just added to their reputations. After more than a couple unfortunate run-ins, the members of Stray Kids and NCT 127 went way back.

Jisung's smile wavered tensely on his face. "Jungwoo. How've you been?"

The lynx glowered at him. "Great, without you."

... for more reasons than one.

The rest of Stray Kids came out of their browsing places to back their own members up.

"I was wondering where those tacky motorcycles came from," Changbin sniped.

"They're not tacky and you *know* it!" Taeil retaliated.

"What brings you lowlives out of your hiding place?" asked Yuta.

"A trip that just *happened* to make a stop here," Seungmin countered. "We have lives outside of you guys."

"That you've chosen to live in the same grubby old small town," parried Doyoung. "Surprised you even knew the outside world existed."

"Stray Kids," Haechan jeered. He jerked his chin at SeungIn. "Did you get that name after letting these two in?"

Changbin and Felix held out an arm to keep the two from lunging at him. "You keep them out of this," Felix ordered him.

"What? Can they not fight for themselves either?"

"Alright, I think we've all gotten enough of an eyeful of each others' faces for another decade," Minho cut in. "Let's just part our separate ways and forget about this again, yeah?"

"I dunno," Mark mused. "I kinda like this reunion we're having."

"You still stealing souls down in Eldritch, siren?" said Jaehyun, aiming the jab at Hyunjin.

Hyunjin ignored the myth. "Not as many as the hearts," he responded easily. "Sorry, though- I'm not too interested in yours."

Taeil shoved a slightly crestfallen Jaehyun behind him. "And he wouldn't want you either! Not after what your spriggan did to Jungwoo."

"A fate I wouldn't wish on anyone," Jungwoo intoned somberly.

Jisung gaped. "You were in town for a *month*, four years ago. And you broke up with *me*!"

"After *you* made it clear that a day with your coven members was more worthwhile than three weeks spent with me!"

"You wanted me to move out with you, and I said no. And *then* you wrecked my garden!"

"I never even *touched* it."

"Well." Jisung's mouth zipped tight, face growing red. "Maybe not *physically*."

Whenever a spriggan felt at home in a certain place, they would start to put down roots- literally; growing flowers and trees and all kinds of plantlife in the place that made them the most happy, whether it be a natural or urban setting. And the more connected the spriggan felt to their home, the more their garden would reflect their moods, thriving when they were happy, wilting when they were sad. 127's last day in Eldritch, Jungwoo and Jisung had delved into the huge fight that resulted in their breakup, and the aftermath had been so bad, even the pothos ivy* gnarled in its pot.

Jungwoo rolled his eyes. "Of course. Still blaming me for the way things ended."

"Because you didn't listen to how *I* felt! We could've talked things out, forgiven each other instead of fighting like we are now."

"In conclusion, our boy is a prize and you wasted your chance," Chan affirmed.

The lynx sniffed. His eyes gave a meaningful slide below Jisung's belt buckle. "Not like you ever had much to show for it."

"Oop," Johnny peeped.

Jisung became even more offended. "That's a lie of a low blow and you know it. Come on, Changbin, back me up here."

"*What*," Felix and Hyunjin faced the demon at the same time.

Changbin's eyes shut. "One time, I walked in on you in the shower *one* time!"

"Damn, they're all still pining," Mark murmured disappointedly.

Jeongin pointed past his head. "Hey, could one of you pass me that black cherry soy candle over there?"

Johnny, who wasn't as caught up in the rivalry between their covens, reached for the shelf. "Sure, bro."

"*Don't* you touch that candle!" Taeyong screeched, so jarringly the wyvern dropped it. Jeongin snatched it up anyways. "If you all think you can sweep *three years* of discord under the rug, you've got another thing coming."

"Tae, please," Chan disputed. "I think we all know that life is too long to hold on to a grudge for this long."

"Is that a white flag you're trying to raise?" The basilisk sneered. "You didn't show *me* any mercy when you humiliated me in front of my coven."

"Is that seriously what all this is about? A bar fight where we were *both* drunk and stupid?"

"My third eye was open that whole night- I remember *everything!*"

"Then you can forget it, too. I apologized enough the first time, and I'm not gonna give in to a second."

Fuming, Taeyoung yanked him in by the front of his jacket. "I won't let you breathe long enough for there to *be* a second."

"Get your hands off him!" Minho threw him off, made himself a barrier in front of Chan.

"The vampire, still using his djinn to protect him," Yuta jeered, the lackey.

"Minho doesn't *belong* to anyone!" Seungmin snarled.

"HEY!"

The cashier- Seungyoon -was leaning over his desk, an irritated expression scrunching his features. "If you guys are gonna fight, take it outside! Those strawberry muffins just got here!"

Both covens looked to where he was gesturing angrily at the innocent handbasket with muffins piled high on a blue checkered cloth. It might not have been enough to vanquish the war, but for now, it resolved the battle in a draw.

Taeyong straightened back up. "I'd say it's been a pleasure, but it hardly ever is." He nodded at his boys. "127, move out."

Snapping out the lapels of his jacket, he turned on his heel and headed for the back way out with a clenched fist. The rest of his coven followed suit and imitated in perfect unison, signature numbers embroidered in radioactive lime green on the backs of each one.

"Assholes," Changbin muttered.

"Yeah," Jeongin agreed. "Can we still get matching jackets, though?"

"No," the coven shot back at once.

Despite Hyunjin's offer to drive, Chan insisted on taking the wheel to get his mind off Taeyong's threat. Even with that in mind, the car ride was silent- not even music to take away from the grind of wheels on the road and Minho's foot tapping the the beat of the rushing wind.

In the backseat, Hyunjin had All Time Low dialed up at full volume, Changbin and Felix were splitting the strawberry muffin they'd bought at the general store, Seungmin and Jeongin were playing I Spy through the window while Jisung twisted a petunia* into bloom, crushed it into his fist, and revived it over and over again.

"Oh my God, Minnie, *look*," Jeongin hissed.

"What?"

"That prairie dog on the hill, I can't."

"It looks like he's staring right at us."

"Picture, take a picture!"

"Okay, okay!" Seungmin hauled out his backpack from the trunk and rummaged through it. "Huh. The hell, I- I can't find it."

"Your camera?" Nod. "But you leave it in the same place all the time. It couldn't be anywhere else."

"I'll look for it in the back, see if it fell out." Before Seungmin could object, Jeongin flung his torso over the backseat and began his search. "What the *fuck*?"

"What is it this time?" Minho asked, not taking his temple off his hand.

"The arrow! The one that Jisung and I stole from the In-N-Out! It's *gone*!"

Felix glanced up from his muffin. "Are you sure you didn't miss it?"

"Would you miss a giant yellow arrow in the back of your car? No. It's nowhere, and so is Seungmin's camera!"

Jisung looked up from his flower pulverizing. "Wait, you both lost stuff?"

"Yeah." Jeongin stilled. He dropped back into his seat. "You don't think it was stolen, do you?"

"But we lock up this car every time we leave," Changbin objected.

"Doesn't mean people still can't break in," Jisung pointed out. "How else would it go missing?"

"Has anyone else lost something of theirs?" Seungmin called out.

Changbin checked the side compartment, Felix bent down to look under his seat, and even Hyunjin pulled out an earbud to pull out the ceiling vent, where he breathed a sigh of relief on seeing that his favorite dreamcatcher was still there. "Not us."

As Minho rifled through the glove compartment, Chan tried to keep his focus on the road. *Surely we couldn't have had that much taken from us.* They couldn't have been that stupid.

But still, his hand drifted to his front hoodie pocket. Then his pants pockets. Then inside.

Holy fuck, he was that stupid.

"What is it?" Minho asked, concerned and completely ignorant. "Did you lose something too?"

Chan's eyes, bulged wide with dread and fear, met his. "We've been robbed."

The car veered a hard left off the side of the road, and he kicked open the door before he'd even fully turned it off. "God. Oh, *fuck.*"

Seungmin was right out after him. "What happened?" Given he knew the direction of his drift, it didn't take long for him to catch on. "Did you lose the ring?"

"I-I don't know how I did. I've had it on me for weeks!"

"Retrace your steps. Where do you remember having it last?"

"I know I had it with me on the drive. Then- then we went to the store, and we ran into 127, and-" *Oh.* "No."

"Guys," Felix's voice echoed from the back. "You might wanna see this."

The boys raced around the sides to the trunk of the car. "Son of a *dick*," Jeongin swore.

Spray-painted over their license plate in infuriating bright green, was the logo of NCT 127.

"They were right with us the whole time!" Changbin said incredulously. "How could we not have seen?"

"Taeil and Mark did get to the party a little late," Hyunjin recalled. "*Shit*."

Seungmin whispered to Chan, so no one else could hear, "How did you lose the ring?"

"Must've been when Taeyong grabbed me," the vampire whispered back. "It probably fell out, and he caught it without me noticing."

"Fuck no," Jisung cursed, already pacing. "I did not almost get arrested with Jeongin for that arrow, and I know for a *fact* that there are way too many embarrassing pictures taken by that camera to be trusted with anyone else. We're getting our shit back."

"Great idea, Einstein," Minho snarked. "How do you suggest we do that? They could've skipped Utah altogether in the time it took for us to realize what they did."

"They could've," Chan murmured, the gears in his brain already turning, "but we know they've gotta be somewhere."

He yanked his hoodie over his head, leaving a black t-shirt on underneath, and held it out to Seungmin. "You think this could make a good scent article?"

Seungmin accepted it gingerly, lifting the collar to his nose. "Fortunately, that guy already reeked of enough leather and Bleu de

Chanel to freshen up about ten locker rooms." Another sniff. He looked out at the road ahead. "This'll just make them easier to follow."

Chan twirled the car keys back into his palm. "Then we've got ourselves a mission."

The boys whooped and hollered like wild animals as they piled into the car, Seungmin telling Chan to head north. "*Heist, heist, heist, heist* - "

"I hate them even more, now," Seungmin muttered.

"What's this reason?" Minho called up to him.

Impossible to tell how he could have heard him from the top of a Douglas fir, but if the guy had the nose of a dog, he must've had the ears of one too. "They've got a secret base in a cavern in the woods full of their own war trophies. Add that to the leather jackets, and they've really got their whole brand figured out."

It had taken nearly six hours, afternoon to moonrise, using Hyunjin and Changbin's playlists for hype, but they had made it- staking their opponents out from a tree was only necessary for detail purposes.

"But they're all there?" Chan prompted.

"All of them. Taeyong's saying some dumb shit and-" Seungmin cringed. "Damn, that's a lot of AC/DC."

"Good enough. Now throw down the scope- you know what to do."

The werewolf groaned. "Do I *have* to?"

"Time's a-wasting, Min."

"Ugh."

In the Neo Zone, the reptilians were laughing it up in a circle of beanbags around a bonfire at another one of their leader's tales of their greatness. "Wait," Mark interrupted. "Did you guys hear that?"

Taeyong held up a hand for silence. The long, droning wail sounded again, but this time deeper, longer- a howl. "Sounded like a wolf."

Johnny jolted upright. "We don't like wolves."

"Clear out, men- let's go check it out."

Meanwhile, back in the tree:

"Aaaand they're coming," Seungmin announced, scaling his way down the tree. "You guys still suck."

"You can stay behind with Minho if you want- someone's got to watch the car," Chan told him. "Changbin, Hyunjin, you guys remember the plan, right?"

"I go in the cavern with you," Hyunjin recited.

"And I stand guard outside," said Changbin. "And if someone approaches-"

"You will not kill them," Chan finished for him.

"I didn't say I would! I was just suggesting some potentially essential violence."

"We don't need Taeyong running at us again if we bang up one of his members."

"One head smashed into a wall. *One*. Think of the arrow!"

"And the Polaroid," Jeongin added.

Seungmin cleared his throat pointedly: *And the ring*.

Chan gave in. "Fine. But only if they hit first."

"Yes!"

"Jisung, Felix, Jeongin, same goes for you. If anyone sees you guys in the forest, just keep them away from the car."

"*Sir, yes sir!*" The trio saluted.

Chan beckoned his own trio to his side. "Autobots, roll out."

Jisung leading the right and Chan leading the left, they took off into the forest while Minho and Seungmin ducked back into the driver and passenger's seats.

"They can have their fun." Minho rolled up the windows and cued his own playlist. "Until then, it's time I gave you a proper course on good music."

Narrowly dodging an interception from Doyoung and Haechan, Chan dragged Changbin and Hyunjin into the shadow of a tree to skip the running ahead- with shadow travel, it was opening a portal to where you wanted to be, stepping through to another near enough location where the light met the darkness. When they jumped in and stepped out again, they'd reappeared by the lip of the cavern's entrance where all ten motorcycles were leaning by.

"Let's make this quick," Chan instructed. "Remember, only take what we came for."

"And I'll be here." Changbin leaned against the wall. "Waiting, alone."

"Sure you don't need backup?"

"That a trick question?"

"Just testing."

As much as NCT 127 served to constantly piss them off, it had to be recognized that they sure knew how to liven a place up. Above the ring of beanbags, green fairy lights were woven around crystal stalactites, with traffic lights hanging from barbed wire. Group pictures nailed crookedly into the walls, dartboards pinned with pocketknives, a card tower of pizza boxes, jackets hung on skateboards. Near a pyramid of Monster Energies was the jackpot: an orderless mountain of everything a being with opposable thumbs could grab, labeled by a defaced STOP sign as Treasure Island.

"There's fucking *more*." Hyunjin jabbed a finger at a side entrance guarded by a curtain of chains. "I don't know about you, but I'm checking it out."

"Be careful- yell if you run into trouble."

"I won't." And he plunged into the caves.

Chan made immediately for Treasure Island- if he was going to find their stuff anywhere, it was up there.

Stepping over the sign, he rummaged through the mess, using an electric guitar like a hiking stick to pick his way through. It couldn't have been too high- they'd only just gotten it today. *Then again, if that really is a 50's era TV with a whole axe stuck through it, I could find anything here.*

But then it caught his eye- just a little on the left, sandwiched between a cracked mirror and a Satanized scattering of velones de santos: Seungmin's camera.

He picked it up just to be sure. It was a little dented now, but it was the same shade of delicate periwinkle, with the same Dollar Store stickers Felix had stuck on it and the same yellow roses* Hyunjin had painted. Across the back was something Seungmin had written himself, from one of his favorite poems: *I believe in an eternity with you.*

Breaking out into a smile, Chan unzipped the fanny pack strapped across his chest and slipped it inside.

"Chan!"

Mark was standing below the pile, staring up at him with disbelief. "What're you doing here?"

"Uh." He zipped up the fanny pack. "Well, I wouldn't say it's a misunderstanding, because really, why else would I be here."

"Ah." The guy scratched the back of his head. "So you're getting your stuff back?"

"Yeah. The In-N-Out sign wasn't very subtle."

"I know, I know."

"Yup." Chan jumped down from the pile. "And- while I've got you here, and no one's fighting, would you happen to know where a- a ring would be? It's kind of important to me."

"Oh." Mark dug into his pocket, that motherfucker, and brought it out. "You mean this?"

"Yes!" The vampire ran for it, stopped halfway. "Wait. I'm not gonna have to kick the shit out of you for this, am I?"

"No! No shit-kicking needed. It's yours." He tossed it, and Chan caught it in his fist. "Tae caught it when he grabbed you, then gave it to me, and well, I didn't really know what the big deal was." Mark puffed out a hesitant laugh. "Johnny has one theory- you don't have to answer, it's totally cool, but - is it for Minho? 'Cause you guys've been together for a *really* long time and - "

"Yeah," Chan admitted breathily. "Yeah, it is."

"Congratulations! That's so cool- I've never known anyone who's getting married before! I mean- I don't *know*, it's not really *official* yet,

and I'm supposed to hate you, but yeah!"

"Thanks." Awkward swaying. "So, we're cool?"

"Yeah. Oh, dude, you kidding? Totally. Totally cool." But look on his face was a pipe threatening to burst.

Chan sighed. "Dude, come on-"

"GUYS, IT'S STRAY KIDS, THEY GOT INTO THE CAVE -"

Mark's body fell to the ground with a hard *whump*. "Sorry, bud." Chan dropped the guitar he'd swung like a baseball bat and shoved the ring back in his pocket. "Boys, get ready to rumble!"

In the caves, Hyunjin bit down a curse. *Fuck*. Of course that little asshole would rat them out- *before* he'd found the sign. Which meant he had to pick up the pace.

Hyunjin raced past room after room- the names above the entrances had been scratched with jagged claws. But none of them showcased an In-N-Out arrow. Thankfully, Jeongin and Jisung just *had* to steal the biggest, flashiest thing they could think of.

As he ran on, the tunnel grew darker, so dark that they had to be lit up with fat, bloodred gothic candles in little niches. The candlelight blurred into two smudged streaks of flame as he ran on, yellow Docs stomping over red rose petals- wait, *rose petals?* - until they met with the light in the tunnel at the end and stumbled into the final room. And. Wow.

"Of course," Hyunjin panted.

Of *course* these guys had an underground hot spring.

And of course it had to look awesome. Size of your neighbor's swimming pool and the same blue-green as chrysoprase, it was towered over by a spiraling ceiling of stone and shards of sharp, opaque white crystal. There were little caves to dive into for safety,

and a ring of land around it, just in case one needed some diving room.

Then there was the finishing touch: right there, hanging from a stalactite, was the great golden arrow of In-N-Out.

He could hear the voices drawing nearer- from the corner of the room. *A secret entrance.* Again, of course.

He darted inside along the ledge, pulling himself into a cave behind the arrow, almost directly across from the entrance. Any minute, they'd find their way in. *And when they do, I'll be ready.*

"Footprints, on the ground. They're leading up from the petals." Yuta's voice always had a particularly recognizable annoying quality.

A scoff. "Looks like the same stupid boots Jisung always wears."

Hyunjin's mouth twisted into a scowl on instinct. Jungwoo he would recognize anywhere. *He won't be finding him here.*

Sure enough, following the yellow Doc road, Jungwoo and Yuta stumbled inside, one holding the other back to keep him from accidentally falling into the spring.

"Water's clear," Yuta reported. "The footprints go off to the left- come on."

"Wait." Jungwoo pulled him back again. "Look again." *Smart guy.*

The steam was rising up at an unnatural speed, collecting as mist that fogged up the air. "Fuck, it's *him*."

Damn, it felt good to be recognized.

Hyunjin stilled the vapor once it was thick as a cloud, once he could drop safely out of his hiding place and grin as their silhouettes startled and whipped around. They wouldn't be able to see him, but they would hear him perfectly clear.

*"Oh, baby, don't you know I suffer,"**

"Oh, baby, can you hear me moan?"

Hyunjin walked towards them, taking his time. *"You caught me under false pretenses."* Under his hands, the water in the spring began to rise, a puppet to its master. *"How long before you let me go?"*

Jungwoo and Yuta whirled around, both mid transformation, but it was already too late.

"Oh," Hyunjin sang as he lifted the water of the hot spring from its bed, shaping it with each subtle move into a weapon. *"You set my soul alight."*

"Oh, you set my soul alight,"

The water took shape into one long, murky turquoise bullet, and rammed straight into them, taking them screaming away into the wall.

Yes, Hyunjin could control water under normal circumstances, that was only the bare minimum. When a siren began their song, it amplified their power tenfold, weakening their opponent's strength and willpower while bending the nearest source of one of the most unpredictable and dangerous elements on the planet to their own wishes. Essentially, it meant he could beat the crap out of his enemies and have one hell of a blast doing so.

Jungwoo and Yuta, soaking wet, clumsily regained their footing and ran at him through, *"Glaciers melting in the dead of night,"* and Hyunjin blocked their blows with a shifting fluid shield, returning them double with the power of, *"The superstars sucked into the supermassive."*

He spun and dodged and danced out of the way of their attacks, sweeping them off their feet in a swirling bubble of a globe. Hyunjin took one minute to memorize Jungwoo's wide, fearful eyes before he

sent them and their hot spring hurling out of the open entrance, crashing through the chains and smacking into the wall before crumpling to the ground. *"You set my soul."*

Once he'd heard the word 'rumble,' Changbin pushed off the wall and turned fully on his feet. "Don't have to tell me twice." If he was going to get an excuse to beat the snot out of anyone in 127, he would make it count.

On cue, two shiny black leather jackets came charging into view- Sichaeng and Taeil, frowns screwed up in fury. "I see you've gotten our invitation."

Sichaeng glared. "Out of the way, imp. This's our place."

"In case you haven't already heard, it's being used. You'll have to wait your turn."

Fuming, Taeil tried to edge past him, but Changbin caught him by the collar of his shirt. "Afraid I can't let you do that." He flung him back with a cordial smile. "Sorry."

Some might've said he was just asking to get demolished, and perhaps they were right. But when Taeil's short temper reached it's fuse and came loose in a flying punch, he was already rushing to meet it.

Changbin's uppercut caught Taeil square in the stomach before Sichaeng could even move to defend. The drake staggered back into the arms of his friend, slowly tipping his eyes up with building rage.

The demon cracked his knuckles, igniting his fists with flowing, mercurial darkness, stolen from the shadows themselves. "Now are we ready to talk?"

Taeil didn't talk so much as roar bloody murder as he careened off of Sichaeng, arms already bursting out of his jacket sleeves covered in

the robust red scales of a drake. *Looks like my wish is coming true after all.*

Demons were another kind of creature of the night- the kind that, once they were made, they were never meant to see the light again. But, if you were a stubborn son of a bitch like Changbin, one would learn to harness the dark and turn it into an ally. Now, demons weren't able to shadow travel, or anything fancy like that, but they could pull some extra battle strength from their master and temporarily fuse it in with their bodies, giving them the ability to hit hard as the dark itself.

He adopted the immediate stance as they came for him: fists level at the ready, elbows tucked in, feet diagonally spread apart. Taeil whaled on him, taking every chance he could for a hit. But anger made fighters reckless- while he lunged for every sliver an opening, Changbin could strike in the gaping holes he left behind, at the side, in the shoulder, move back.

Sichaeng, on the other hand, was faster, moving into Changbin's blind spots when he was occupied with Taeil. He would try to move in from behind, slug at the weak points, back him further to the wall. That was where taking advantage of the setting came into play.

Ducking one of Taeil's hits, Changbin drove an elbow hard into his stomach and shrugged out from beneath him. When Sichang came to take his place, he dropped low and rushed him backwards, sending him stumbling back on the dirt, but not enough to knock him off his feet. The duo surged towards him again, and Changbin grabbed the nearest object he could find- a motorcycle wheel -and yelled, hurling the entire vehicle at them like a ball to bowling pins.

Taeil and Sichang collapsed to the ground, the motorcycle on it's side with them. Overkill? Definitely.

"I said *not* to kill anyone!" Chan shouted, standing in the entryway beside a stunned Hyunjin.

"They're not dead!" Just to be sure, Changbin knelt between them-breathing, but hazy. "They'll wake up in a bit. Wait, what happened to you guys?"

"Mark stayed behind, and Jungwoo and Yuta used a back entrance," Hyunjin explained. "It isn't your fault."

"Not like anyone would've gotten past you anyways," Chan commented, eying their fallen foes.

"I told you, they're *fine*. Reptiles heal faster than humans- read that somewhere. Now go."

"Without you?" asked Hyunjin.

"Don't you want a head start before more of those guys get here? If they do, I can take them. Go."

This time, their worried looks were aimed at him. But Chan took Hyunjin's hand all the same. "Be careful." They walked into a shadow on the opposite side of the entrance and disappeared through it.

Changbin allowed himself a release, wincing his own exhale. Yup- he'd cracked something. Plus the feeling of a bloody nose was nothing new. But the motorcycle looked to be in okay shape. *Tacky as they are, I have always wanted one.*

From high up, Jisung could hear it.

"Oh, baby, don't you know I suffer,"

"Oh, baby don't you hear me moan?"

Hyunjin's voice synchronized with the grunts of caught punches; the top of a tree was a great way to watch your friend brawl two

members of a rival coven. Though neither could hear Jisung cheer them on, he was with them in spirit.

"Oh," Jisung harmonized with Yuta's scream. *"You set my soul alight,"*

"Oh, you set my soul alight,"

"Hey, twig!" Jaehyun's voice bellowed from below. "Pretty sure your fight's with us!"

"Can it wait?" Jisung yelled. "I'm pretty sure they're almost done!"

A cockatrice talon caught his shoulder; he only had time to think, *That's a no*, before he was launched horribly off balance and sent falling headfirst to the forest floor.

He was able to rotate somewhat midair so he hit the ground with a pitiful imitation of a three-point-landing and a new tear in his gray jeans instead of a spine-shattering backbend. Coughing, Jisung pushed himself to his feet, regathering the air in his lungs to watch Mark phase back into human form, leaving behind two golden feathers that drifted softly to the dirt. "Was that really necessary?"

"Given that you were watching your coven do your dirty work from a tree, I'm pretty sure it was," Jaehyun retorted.

"Well, no one would be fighting if Mark here had just shut up," said Jisung, gesturing to said Mark. "Seriously, man, what the hell?"

Jaehyun side-eyed him; Mark stuck out his chin. "I know where my loyalties are, and they are with my coven. Also Chan threatened to kick my ass, so."

"I'm literally so sure that didn't happen."

"Well- then how do you explain him hitting me with a guitar?"

"You *ratted* us out. What did you expect him to do, just let you go? That was cold, man."

"I - "

"Ratatouille the way you ratted us out."

"Wha - "

"Mickey Mouse the way you ratted us out."

"*Why* - "

"The bubonic fucking *plague* the way you lied to his majestic, dimpled face and threw us under the bus. Do I have to turn around so you can see the tracks on my back?"

"Enough talking!" Jaehyun's gold eyes flashed into a biscione's slit pupils. "It's time for a rematch."

"Rematch? For what?"

He frowned. "Woodstock 2014?"

"Ohhh, right. Sorry, lot happened that day."

"Then how would you like a refresher?"

"I can tell by the way you said that that you think you're gonna win."

"And what makes you think we won't?" Mark challenged.

Jisung grinned. "The fact that you challenged a spriggan in the middle of a forest to a rematch."

The weight of it took a minute to sink in. Then Mark started backing away. "*Fuck-*"

- and a cataclysm of green roots erupted out of the earth beneath them. Neither Jaehyun nor Mark could even trip over their feet before their limbs were seized by the roots, lashing out and coiling around them, controlled by Jisung's own hands.

"Man, you guys must feel stupid," Jisung went on, fingers curled in towards his palms as he approached them. "I mean, I appreciate the fact that you enjoyed talking to me so much you didn't even realize I was stalling, but damn. That was even quicker than I expected."

Jaehyun thrashed furiously. "I *never* forgave you for Woodstock!"

"I could tell." Jisung's splayed hands curved into fists that made the roots tighten even more. "Any last words?" A flicker of fear crossed over their faces. "Chill, I'm not gonna kill you, I'm just gonna chuck you into the trees."

"Could you..." Jaehyun gulped. "Could you give Hyunjin my number?"

"No. Mark?"

Mark glanced down at the roots, at the several feet he was suspended off the ground, and tried for a smile. "I'm sorry?"

"Come back when you mean it." Releasing his hands at his sides, Jisung launched his opponents at the moon.

He dusted off his hands and started back for the car, but had to jump out of the way of-

"You little *menace!*" Taeyong shrieked, hightailing it for the cave. A muddy pawprint smudged his cheek.

A fluffy blur of white with a ghostly giggle dashed out of the bushes after him. Jisung relaxed into a laugh. "How's it going, Jeongin?"

"Got him right where I want him- losing his mind!" The gumiho bounded over the bushes after his victim.

There was only so much one could do in a human body. At least as a fox no one had a name to call you when you ran over their fence. In a smaller, slither form, Jeongin could do what he always loved: cause chaos. And with the full moon, his strength was at its highest.

Taeyong ran into the middle of the clearing, looking out every which way. His eyes were crazed and dilated, slowly turning red. "I'm not afraid of you! Come out and face me!"

"I dunno, that's kinda something you should do when you're ready," Jeongin replied, snickering as he dashed through the bushes. "Don't worry- I won't tell!"

Taeyong growled, shifting uneasily on his feet. Suddenly he shot out at the bramble where he'd been just moments before, shouting in frustration. "What are you, a ghost?"

"Yes, sweetie, it's your mother. It's lonely here in hell- come visit."

"My mother *never* sounded like that!"

"Did I say I was telling you the truth?"

Taeyong was too momentarily shook to respond. Jeongin rustled out of the bush and began his climb up the tree. "Who sent you?"

"Frances McDormand, from Good Omens. It's all real."

"I *knew* it- wait, no!" Jeongin had to hold his breath to keep from laughing. "You wicked creature. I can't trust you!"

"You can't- the world is an illusion. I am the Cheshire Cat that further confuses your direction."

"I know my own direction! I have my own rivals to defeat- where is that Chan- "

"What is a Chan? Why are you letting me keep you from him?"

"I am *not*! You just refuse to leave me alone!"

"How do you know if I'm truly here?" Jeongin scurried up to a high branch of the tree. "What if all this is just in your head?"

Taeyong threw his head back and yelled into the uncaring universe, "*What do you want from me?*"

"Just your goals and sanity."

"No- no, I refuse. I *refuse* to play this game!"

"That's a shame- it's tag." Jeongin sprang into human form, swung upside down on the branch in front of the moon. "And last I checked, you're still it."

Taeyong's whole face fell. Then, twisting with anger. "You little *shit*."

Jeongin beamed. "Catch me if you can." And he swung off and leapt away into the night.

His path was lit by blinding flashes of light, flares and streaks of brilliant pearl white- with them, he could escape safely as Felix handled his own adversaries.

Doyoung growled. "You know, there's more *efficient* ways to fight someone."

"I know." Felix offered him a smile. "Just thought you might want some help seeing who you're fighting- then you might actually hit me."

Haechan roared, slashing at him with blade-sharp tarasque claws, following every faint vein of left-behind luminescence and disrupted by a sharp elbow to the side and the circling heel of a Tenth Doctor Converse to the face, landing on nimble feet. When Doyoung attempted to take his place, Felix whirled out of the way and, dragging an open hand through the air, cracked his head into the trunk of a tree with an illuminated palm.

They had different fighting styles, all of them- some used ways to make fun out of it, to savor it, to avoid as much of it as possible. But when character combined with power, it always made for a unique experience. Since Heaven wasn't exactly the most rough-and-tumble place, Felix picked up what he could from guys like Chan and Changbin, who'd learned their techniques in dark streets and grimy buildings with wooden boards and punching bags from friends who were loyal enough to teach them. But Felix was made of lighter stuff- float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. He could stay on his toes, dodge and attack at the speed of the light he borrowed from whatever source was nearest, treat it almost like a dance, the way Hyunjin and Jeongin did. In that way, it was almost fun.

"Do you even wonder *why* we're fighting?" Felix asked, backing away and breaking left from Doyoung's attempted strike. "It's not like it's our problem."

"You're in the coven," Doyoung followed, aiming another cross. "It might as well be."

"Yeah, but I don't see why it *has* to." The guy fought like Changbin, Felix noticed, but a little slower to react. "A mob mentality's wasted on that kind of logic."

"You having second thoughts on challenging us?"

Doyoung lobbed a chunk of rock like it was a dodgeball. "Not at all." Felix caught it inches in front of his face before it even left his hand. "But you were the ones who challenged me."

Light seeping out of the cracks, he crushed it into rubble and shoved Doyoung back. What he didn't see, however, was Haechan recovering from his previous attack and using his transformed upper body to wield a fallen tree and swing like a baseball bat hitting a homer, Felix being the ball.

But Felix used his own back hitting an upright fir as leverage, rebounding off the bark and up, catching a branch and swinging,

then dropping down and crouching into a run for the pond where moonlight rippled over the water.

"What happened?" Haechan called, cackling. "We were just having fun!"

Leaping over a bush, Felix reached out to the water as he met the bank of the pond. The light responded to his call, retreating from the water's surface and towards his open hand, slowly solidifying into a steady stream.

By the time Haechan and Doyoung caught up, he'd shaped his newfound weapon into a river in his hands, an orb that crackled when he threw them apart, a deathly ray that they caught in the chest and went flying back through the foliage when he thrust out his hands.

A thud of the bodies on dirt. Jisung poked his head out from behind the nearby tree and whistled. "I was just gonna check up on you, see how you were doing, but it looks like you handled that nicely."

"Thanks." Felix stepped over the hedge, accepting the spriggan's helping hand. "Are we the last ones?"

"Pretty sure HyunChan took off a while ago, and last I saw Jeongin, he was running for the car. Don't know what happened to Bin, though."

On their right, the bushes rustled, and Johnny broke out, screaming, "*Vibe check!*"

He got approximately five seconds of screen time before an aerial motorcycle knocked him over.

Johnny conked out safely on the sidelines, the rider touched ground and skidded messily to a halt. Sliding off, Changbin raked the hair out of his eyes with a rugged movie-star grin. "Get on."

"I'm gay," Felix breathed in awe.

"We know, Felix," Jisung whispered. "Did you steal one of their bikes?"

"They already had ten- just thought I'd take one off their hands. Plus I used it to knock two of their guys down, so I really didn't want the evidence to be around for it to draw back to me."

"Sounds valid." Jisung dramatically cocked an ear to the wind. "Was that Minho calling after me? Better go see what he wants."

Throwing out a hand, he shot a root out of the ground and Tarzan'ed out of the woods, leaving the demon and angel alone.

Changbin scuffed the heel of his shoe on the dirt, cleared his throat. "So. Shall we?"

Felix dusted off the back of his hoodie, smoothly plucking the twig sticking out of his hair. "We shall."

Changbin settling back on the bike, Felix followed cautiously after, circling his arms around his waist, flinching back when he winced. "You okay?"

"Yeah, you're good, just- fucked my rib. In that fight."

"Of course you did."

"Well, you're still gonna fix it, aren't you?"

"One day, I'm gonna say no."

"But not tonight?"

In the rearview mirror, Changbin was smiling, ego notched up an extra level. "Not tonight."

If Seungmin and Minho knew anything about the going-ons of the heist, they were too busy drowning it out with Ariana Grande.

"Rumor has it that the day Ariana released Santa Tell Me, Mariah fell right off the map," Minho told his pupil over the blaring music. "She was never heard from again."

"Uncanny," Seungmin dutifully replied. "Oh, would you look at that, there they are now."

"Fucking took them long enough."

In the time it took for Minho turn down the tunes and unlock the doors while Seungmin returned to his seat, Chan had thrown his body across the hood of the car and swung into his place with the roof, Hyunjin, Jisung, and Jeongin dove their own into their designated spots with no regards whatsoever for their own safety, and all without slashing any Achilles tendons.

Minho conducted a headcount from the rearview mirror. "Two, three... where's the others?"

A couple motorcycle revs and the thrashing of forcefully parted branches, and ChangLix launched into view on the back of a motorcycle, both looking immensely proud of themselves.

Jaw dropped, brows raised, Hyunjin gave up, hands in the air as if he was bearing Atlas' weight with utmost sarcasm. "I'm not even gonna say anything at this point except '*knew it.*'"

"He stole it from 127's base and saved Jisung and I with it," Felix clarified, beaming ear to ear. "It's a pretty hot look." Changbin looked at him quizzically. "For both of us. Can we keep it?"

"Please?" Changbin added, batting his eyes.

Minho, who had already deigned to appoint himself their getaway driver, let them down with a scoff. "Just as long as you find a good

place to put it at the motel."

He drew a circle in the air with one lazy finger, and a circle of black, empty space appeared before them- a wormhole in an endless cosmos of junk that was opened up whenever they had something they didn't know where to put. Changbin happily steered it inside, catching a high-five from Felix.

"Alright," Chan started, holding up the AUX. "Who wants to play the victory credits-"

"*Chan!*"

"Come *ON*."

Taeyong staggered out of the woods, teetering this way and that, looking like he'd just broken out of a fortress of padded walls. Johnny stuck close by to steady him. "Your day of reckoning has come!"

"I thought you dealt with him," Jisung hissed to Jeongin.

"Clearly, not well enough," the gumiho murmured, equally dismayed.

"You bring your coven to send mine into shambles, scattering them in the woods, attempt to distract me with your little *fox boy*." Jeongin flashed a peace sign. "But I have found you. I have waited years for this day, this *moment*, where I *finally* take what I-"

"Dude," Chan intervened, "can we just be cool?"

Taeyong stopped mid-tangent. "What?"

"I don't want to fight you, and I'm pretty sure after dealing with Jeongin and all the rest of this, you don't want to fight me either. Do you even *remember* the night of our fight? We were in the parking lot, and you could barely stand straight, and I pushed you. *Once*. I tried to help you up, and you pushed me away, forsaking revenge, and now here we are. Seriously, that was it. And I don't know about

you, but I'm pretty ready to put it behind us. So if you'll excuse me *and* my coven, we'll be out."

Taeyong sputtered like a busted engine coughing up smoke, shellshocked. "W-Wait! Get back here, I- "

"Aw, shove it, Tae!" Johnny cracked. He waved at the boys through the rear window as they drove off. "Bye, guys! Good luck, Chan!"

Minho slipped a look at his boyfriend. "What was that about?"

Chan shrugged, dimples twinkling as he waved back. "No idea."

Danger - TAEMIN

*Buttercup - Jack Stauber

*Supermassive Black Hole - Muse

*Pothos ivy: Perserverance.

*Petunia: Resentment and anger.

*Yellow rose: Friendship, happiness, and new beginnings.

Wherever You Go

Chapter 5: Wherever You Go

This is where we get into the angsty bits. Prepare for some haunting backstories.

TW: brief descriptions of violence and gore ahead.

Wherever you go, you go, we go too,

Wherever you go, you go we're with you,

Wherever you go, you go, we go too,

Wherever you go, you go we're with you...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"You sure you got the right place?" Changbin asked again.

"Trust me, I'm sure," Chan reassured him. "I know Peniel wouldn't lie to me."

"Then why isn't he at least *here*?" Hyunjin brought up. "This place looks like the haunted mansion from Scooby Doo."

"If there's bats in there, I'm taking the keys and leaving all of you," Jeongin promised.

It didn't sound like there were bats, but judging from the looks of the place, anything could be waiting.

They'd just been cruising along their merry way down to Colorado when, in the middle of the night, Chan had gotten a message from his old friend, with coordinates and a location and a cry for help. Naturally, the vampire had been unable to refuse.

They ended up at the destination of a classically ramshackle Victorian down the road of an abandoned plot of land, just worn down and creepy enough to suggest that there was life within it but not the kind you would want to find. In the sickly pale moonshine, it was painted sickly shades of grey, black, and red, looking like the opening of a nightmare.

Jisung dropped out of the car, sizing up the house. "Yup. This is the exact place I want to be at midnight."

"If BTOB really is here, they probably left us some kind of clue," Felix remarked.

"We're just going in to check it out," said Minho. "Find something, we deal with it. Find nothing, we watch Hocus Pocus in honor of the witching hour."

Chan pried open the door, which almost fell off the hinges in his hand. The inside was much prettier than the outside: red velvet carpets were strewn over the floors- which were the same rotting wood as the house - with cottage lanterns flickering bronze light lining the entry hallway next to every door. A double spiral staircase wrought out of black iron waited for them at the end, with a diamond chandelier hanging in the center.

Seungmin prodded a coat rack, cringing at the rust that came away on his fingertips. "Jesus. Ghost Hunters would probably have a field day with this place."

Jeongin looked over, mouth poking into a smile. "Mm. So many places to set up sound effects and coincidentally blinking lights."

"I wonder what traumatized them enough to think, 'Hey, let's take what my therapist told me about it not being real and manifest that?'"

"Probably those two girls from The Shining. They traumatized me."

"That scared you?"

"I had nightmares about drowning in Kool Aid for weeks, Min. Judge me- I dare you."

Seungmin bit the inside of his cheek to tamp down a smile. "I won't."

Felix admired the chandelier, nudged Changbin's arm. "Hear me out. Given we have yet to see any security cameras- "

"What's tonight's target?"

"The entire chandelier."

"Makes total sense."

"You're saying that like it doesn't."

"You do realize that a chandelier is probably like, one of the most haunt-worthy places in any haunted house, right?"

"If it is, we sell it- boom. Not our problem."

"How did Heaven ever let you under its roof?"

"Well, everyone makes mistakes, don't they?"

"You were too good for it, anyway."

While the pair laughed, Hyunjin didn't seem nearly so at ease. He sent tiny glances at everything, quite literally flinching at his reflection

in the ornate oval mirror they passed, which certainly didn't make Jisung tapping his shoulder and sneaking "Boo!" into his ear any more relaxing.

Hyunjin jumped a foot in the air, Jisung laughing it up. "Could you not fucking do that?"

"It was funny! You get so scared of everything!"

"I do not!"

"Yeah. You do."

"Come on, don't you ever get bad feelings about places?"

"It's a haunted house- you're *supposed* to get a bad feeling about it. The only feeling I get from this place is that any second we're gonna find Lady Dimitrescu at the top of the staircase, and that's more of a blessing than a curse."

"Your *face* is a curse."

"Yet you never try to break it." Jisung smirked at his burning scowl and edged quickly out of range of his shove.

Chan switched off his flashlight. "Let's split up. There's two floors- half of us take one, other half take another."

"Split up?" Jeongin repeated. "Isn't that a little, I don't know - "

"Stupid?" Seungmin offered. "Literally every form of media warns against it. Stranger Things, Aesop's fables, every horror movie in existence. If you don't trust me, trust the evidence."

"It's not like we'll be that far from each other," Changbin vouched in Chan's defense. "There'll still be four of us on each floor. If someone needs help, we'll be able to reach them."

“And the floors are shit,” Jisung piped helpfully. “If it takes too long to climb the stairs, we can always punch through the floor.”

Minho’s face contorted awkwardly into something like encouragement- you had to give him credit for trying. “We’re all grateful for that advice, but I’m very sure it will not come to that. Literally nothing is here.”

“Unless, of course, there is,” Felix quipped. “In which case, we better start looking.”

Chan took first floor with Changbin, Hyunjin, and Jeongin; Minho took the second with Felix, Jisung, and Seungmin.

“Remember, anyone sees anything, call,” Chan reminded them.

Each standing in front of a door, eight knobs twisted in tandem, opening for a different shade of pitch black.

But when they stepped inside, instead of light, they were blinded with- sand.

Minho coughed, wiping the stuff out of his eyes. “*Pleh-* ugh. Felix! Jisung?”

He trailed before he could call for Seungmin.

There was nothing in the room but dark- no light from so much as a window, not even a silhouette of a chair or a bed or anything that might suggest this was a room of any kind.

However, despite having not been there on first blink, there was a door. Round, painted chipped purple, open just a sliver, promising a brighter inside. Daring him to come closer, come look.

“Guys?” Minho tried again. “Anyone?” Nothing.

Well, hell. It wasn't like he wouldn't be able to come back and tell them what he found.

Minho tiptoed inside, testing the waters. Then, before he could lose his nerve, he sped up to a walk, then a race, then a run for the door, slamming behind him before the shadows could steal after.

What he found inside was a corridor.

Not the one that they'd walked into, all eerie and decrepit. It was the age of refinement born anew, golden filigree lining pearlescent walls, gilded glass vases fresh flowers springtime could only dream of, detailed oil paintings as far as the eye could see, red velvet carpets that no moth had ever touched. Regency, luxury, elegance at its finest.

Minho blinked rapidly, rubbed his eyes. *Am I dreaming?* The house wasn't big enough for half of this. But his heart was still beating- everything about him was awake, was fully aware of where he was. *Maybe it's an enchantment, like what I can do.* A place like this had to lead to something special.

Warily, he ventured deeper; sometimes the ground would tilt to the left or the right, shifting off its stability, as if it were a plate balanced on a tipping point. *I remember this kind of beauty.* A whole lifetime ago, when it had been so stifling he couldn't breathe. When he had been another member of the menagerie trapped in its clutches, played and powerless with no way to break free.

A piano melody played tinny out of some imperceptible place in the ceiling- Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. It added to the chill in the air, a remnant of the house he was still in that followed him in an insistent prickle in the back of his neck. The flowers were hued too brightly, smelled too sweet, as if they were trying to poison him. Among them, Minho could have sworn he spotted foxglove.*

The closer he strayed to the sidelines, the more distinct the paintings became, and Minho realized they weren't just Renaissance pieces-

they were depictions of torture, and all the victims were monsters.

Wall to wall, they were filled with them: a harpy screaming through death by milk and honey. A satyr with an unwinding pear of anguish forcing open his mouth. A peryton boy whose haunting delicacy made his breath catch curled in a fetal position inside the belly of a bronze bull, brown hair hanging lank, skin bruised like white rose petals crushed in a merciless fist. His name Minho forced out of his mind before he could think it.

But beside it, a girl fighting to free herself from an iron maiden. Her arms and chest were slit bloody from its spikes, jet black hair wild about her face, eyes fearless and crazed. The lower half of her body where was replaced with eight vicious spider legs. *A jorogumo.*

"*Momo.*" Minho's voice reverberated, faint and horrified. What was her image doing here?

A sharp creak made him start- he'd reached the end of the hall. But that wasn't even it. There was *another* door, tall and polished oak, a star studded with plastic diamonds, reading in slight, subtle black: *Minho.*

Okay. What the fuck.

First Beethoven, then Momo, now this. Like he was some kind of lead role. He couldn't even see the purple door anymore. *This definitely can't be right.*

But, unless BTOB was playing some kind of practical joke on them all, there could only be answers found on the other side.

Yet when Minho walked through it, he was back in the shadows.

With every step forward, it sounded like a million more were being taken with the same one. They didn't land on wood, but something harder, more solid, more sinister.

The loud flip of a switch, and lightbulbs lit up one by one on each side of him, lining the runaway that Minho had reached the end of. They rushed behind him, a thrush of wildfire spreading by candlelight, stretching back miles until it circled a stage, shedding light on huge candy red curtains parting open over a single name emblazoned in the center, bright and blinding as the entire sun.

KAI.

"Hello again, beautiful," he purred, larger than life and everywhere.

Minho's whole body gridlocked.

He couldn't even force himself to run before chains clasped around his wrists- solid gold, just like the ones he used to wear -and yanked him to his knees.

"No," Minho whimpered, pulling at them furiously, helplessly. The gold refused to break, to burn; his powers weren't working. "No, no, *no.*"

And then, as if he'd been waiting for that moment to present himself, Kai apparated out of the darkness in front of him- long hair slicked back like a renegade and a smile cut and cultivated to woo a crowd over one of his several sleek pinstripes, steel gray and tapered sharply, lapel full of red dianthus*, with no shirt beneath the silken purple waistcoat. Over his heart was the tattooed sigil of Lucifer- his warlock mark.

His fingers grazed Minho's chin with a bejeweled hand . *"Did you really think that you could get away from me?"*

Minho cringed back, gritting his teeth. The black diamond on his ring finger glittered. He'd seen it drip with blood.

Kai retracted his hand, sauntered away. *"It's what you've always been- a tool. A servant to another master. Your power is meant to be contained, given direction. With you alone, it's simply worthless."*

Decades of time, of so-called freedom, even a few years out of those cuffs, and you've never been able to forget that. And because you can't convince yourself otherwise, you convince others. It's what you do."

Out of the chasmal ceiling, more chains dropped, six bodies hanging limp- it was the others, bruised and bloody, hanging from the wrists like saints on a cross, puppets on a string. Minho's heart plunged at the sight of them. *"It isn't their fault- they want to believe in something good, something brilliant, something worth following. And you feed into it."*

Kai turned back to him, and his form slimmed, distorted, morphed into his old friend, same as they day he'd left her.

Momo smiled sweetly. *"Thankfully, you're good at it, making people care for you."* Her form shrank and rippled, replacing her black hair with wavy brown, her dark eyes with Huening Kai's broken purple. *"Making people trust you."*

The peryton's form withered away, blown into the dark by an invisible wind. *"And those aren't even the unluckiest. That title's for the suckers who actually fall in love with you."* Chan's form climbed onto the stage, face cold and lifeless, erased from its usual mirth. *"They're the ones that are truly willing to do anything for you."*

Not taking his eyes off of him, Chan shoved his hand into his chest. Minho released a strangled cry as he dug, dug deeper, red gushing out and staining his black polo, all the way to his wrist, until he produced the key to Minho's chains from the depths of his heart. As he was moving to free him, the chains sprang out again, like snakes from a pit, this time latching onto Chan, catching his neck and wrists. His face warped into genuine, heartbreaking hurt. *"And it will always be the death of them."* They jerked him back into the abyss, leaving Minho screaming after him.

"Now doesn't it feel familiar to be back where you belong?"

The voice laughed, and his coven dropped into the abyss, the lights went down, and Minho was alone, pulling at his chains, biting back his tears, trying desperately to convince himself that it wasn't true.

Seungmin opened the door to a forest.

Because that made so much sense. A forest found through a solid purple door. The only the wood in there were trees- actual, unreconstructed trees that extended out by endless acres with no other living obstruction except for him. As a guy who more often than not preferred his solitude, it might have been a little less weird, maybe even comforting had it looked less like a graveyard where sinners went to die.

The trees were tall birch shafts, reedy as skeletons with knobs like wide open eyes, stripped bare of any leaves. Clouds hung misty and low in the air, filtering it thickly with condensation. He couldn't even see the ground- it was covered in a gray fog so dense Seungmin could only listen to the crunch of grass and dead leaves under his feet to know that he was walking on solid ground.

It shouldn't have felt so familiar, he knew- even growing up in the woodlands of Portland never showed him an environment like this. But he knew this uneasiness. This fear.

Seungmin swallowed carefully, trying to slow his breathing. "It's all in your head." Sometimes, it wasn't enough just to think it. Especially when he'd learned that, after all, most things were. In his pack days, he used to take walks like this all the time- whether it was to clear his head or simply get away when things got to be too much. So long as he could persuade himself, it couldn't be wrong.

But this was different. This wasn't a hideout he knew. This was something he hadn't meant to find, with no real directions as to how to deal with it. This place wasn't a place to feel safe.

"Are you sure?"

Seungmin whirled around, looked behind, left and right. He was nowhere- not in the fog, not in the trees. *But I know I heard his voice.* Had he found a way to follow him?

"Jeongin?" No reply. Not even the snap of a twig. *Did I conjure him out of thin air?* Had Seungmin's mental state already deteriorated that much?

Maybe that was a question best left unanswered.

But then he heard the laugh- high and sweet, bright as a symphony. It peeked out from behind a wall of fog in an impish smile, sneaky eyes and swoopy silver hair resting on a slender frame, beckoning him closer. *Jeongin.*

Seungmin took off after him. Faintly, he could see his outline through the fog. He was ahead, he was *there*. "Jeongin!"

It sounded again, just as bright, but this time everywhere- a flock of unseen mockingbirds mimicking the call, forcing it into his ears, taunting him with it. Seungmin slowed apprehensively to a stop.

"Come on, Minnie. Don't you want to find us?"

Yup. It was officially go time.

Seungmin bolted, fighting his way through the fog, swatting branches out of his face, but the voices multiplied, followed him through the haze, all sounding exactly like the others.

"And off he goes again," jeered Minho.

"Where're you headed?" Hyunjin asked.

"What's the big idea?" prodded Changbin.

"Would it kill you to open up?" Jisung sniped.

"You can't run forever," Felix reminded him.

"Get out of my head!" Seungmin screeched.

"Just because you distance yourself from everyone doesn't mean you're better off alone," said Chan.

"Wherever you go, we go too," pledged Jeongin.

"WE'RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE."

It resonated out of everyone he had ever let down.

The toe of his boot hitched on a pebble, and Seungmin gasped as he lurched forward. Grappling hold of a tree, he managed to right himself up, heart still hammering at his chest.

But then he blinked.

He blinked, and the expanse of woodland before him converted into a great wooden drawbridge, groaning with effort as its chains brought it lower and lower, the tongue of a colossal, gaping mouth, waiting to swallow him up.

Two sets of arms gripped his and jerked Seungmin to his feet; a boy and a girl with the same moon-black eyes as him, two faces he'd never been quite able to forget. *Yeeun and Wooseok.*

"You cannot run from fate," they intoned, and shoved him through.

For a moment, the glare was blinding, so painful it brought his hands up to shield his eyes. But when Seungmin came to, the deafening roar of the crowd rang so loud he thought they might bleed, decimating every other sound there could have been.

In place of his graveyard forest, Seungmin had been thrown into a coliseum.

The barriers were made sharpened wood stakes that fenced him in; crowding the stands were other werewolves, members of his old pack he recognized only in glances. *But I escaped,* he thought,

desperately, hoping the memory would make it true. *I left this behind- I didn't do it.*

Before him was his opponent, a sight that made his insides freeze up.

Hyunwoo's grin was razor sharp and dauntless, the look of a man who knew how to get what he wanted without lifting a finger to take it from you. His black hair was raggedly tame, a king in tattered clothes, fitting against his muscular body, which was just as terrifying as any wolf ever would be.

He splayed his arms out wide, as if he was showing him a miracle. *"This,"* Hyunwoo's voice boomed. *"This is what you were destined for."*

Wolves all around stomped their feet in a percussive rhythm, chanting his name. *"You were supposed to be a warrior, a hero. You were meant to bring glory to your pack. You were going to make us all proud."* Hyunwoo swayed closer; even after years of convincing himself he wouldn't be afraid, Seungmin couldn't make himself move. *"But instead, you ran."*

The slap echoed before he felt it raze his skin, the burning slap of a callused palm and claws on his face that sent him reeling to the ground.

"Under the eyes of our goddess and our kind, you fled, too ashamed to face anyone, to admit to how weak you really are. And look what it did! Five years later, and you still can't fully transform."

Without permission from the rest of his body, Seungmin's left arm ached, seized and spasmed as the fingernails began to elongate into claws, as the hair on his arms darkened to the same brown as the hair on his head- there for only a moment, then gone.

Hyunwoo's head reared back in a gut-wrenching howl, before he shifted into a man with black hair that was fluffy like his, and a voice

that was tragic and sympathetic even without song to sing.

"You could've come with me," said Wonpil in his stead, Seungmin's cousin. *"But you were too proud. And you still are."*

The ground rumbled from the spectator's cheering, like the sound Jisung had made through the roots in the ground a few nights ago. Behind him, in the other opening of the coliseum, the wechuge shrieked and clambered into the pit. The head was a deer skull, charging at him, crooked body an emaciated, lanky form covered in shaggy black hair, grabby hands reaching out to fill a stomach that would never be satisfied.

Seungmin stumbled, slipping backwards and landing hard on his palms. There was nowhere else to run.

Jisung opened the door to a paradise.

And yes, he did so fully, completely sober. Just because he had a fondness for mushrooms didn't mean he used them.

Still, Jisung had taken a moment to wonder if that had somehow been the case. As a being whose birth had been sprouting from the first fallen flower of a blue wisteria tree, it was safe to conclude that he had not been created by some guy boringly named God. But the forest he found himself in could only have been made with some perfect, ethereal idea of beauty- a garden of Eden, a way the world should have been.

It was a heaven that most could only dream of: the grass- *real* grass -was a lush, vibrant green, growing out of dirt that hadn't been corrupted by chemicals. Giant, mighty oak trees grew wild and strong, leaves brushing against a dusky twilight sky with no clouds to forge a limit. Bushes and colorful scatterplots of flowers bloomed wherever there was an empty space, blustering amaryllis and sweet bluebells and fragrant crocuses, with honeysuckle weaving their way up anything that stood still. Innocent freshwater ponds lay in resting

spots for those who wandered to find them. The murmur of a babbling waterfall whispered throughout the land, filling his ears with the sound.

There were no walls as far as Jisung could see, no evidence of this being some kind of magical greenhouse. *How else could this place exist?* Plants could be grown, water could be transported- nobody could create a replica of the sun.

But it's so beautiful, Jisung thought, marveling at the verdure from every angle, unable to keep from feeling a little woozy. Maybe he could stick around, find the other end of this place before turning back.

Even so, it was worth noticing that no matter where he looked, he couldn't see any actual living creatures anywhere- no foxes in the bushes, no squirrels scurrying across branches, no birds in the trees. *Not even bees around the knees.* Which was a little beyond odd, given he could hear their song just fine, blending chirps and chitters with shy little growls and friendly buzzing. Maybe it was one of those nature soundtracks people used to help them fall asleep; some weirdos liked to pick and choose between flora and fauna.

Then that would mean there was some other reason. It was common knowledge that plant life and animal life worked together through a fundamental give and take that made a successful ecosystem. *A little sus, not gonna lie.*

Maybe he was just feeling nostalgic for the old days; he couldn't deny that this place reminded him of them. Years ago, when a forest just like this had been his own. He'd had a whole environment to look after, to vibe with, to call home. It hadn't been paradise, the way here somehow was, but it had been beautiful, and, once, everything he had. He still remembered the feeling of it, living through something bigger than him, letting it bring out the best in him. Every day was full of life, full of the energy that flowed out of the first place that you came to call home.

Yeah, that's it, Jisung resolved, laughing it off. Just some late sentiment coming back to the surface. Nothing more.

Moving along, Jisung hummed to the tune of Alien, one of his songs- music always helped calm the nerves. Not one Lady Dimitrescu in sight, somewhat unfortunately.

But he knew he wasn't seeing things when he walked past the wilted blue salvia.*

He stopped when he saw it, backtracked on reflex to take a look. Jisung had a plot of it in his garden back in Levanter, and knew due to a long lifetime of gardening that the only thing that could hurt salvias were pesky inchworms and cold weather.

Yet the petals didn't look chewed or weatherworn. They were blackened as though burned, withering in flecks of ash. He touched one of the buds- skimmed it, really -and the whole plant disintegrated, as if it had been made of nothing but dust.

Jisung rose to his feet, letting the salvia sift through his fingers, a familiar sensation pawing at the inside of his throat what a 'what the fuck' kind of dread. Slowly, regrettably, he turned around.

The entire forest behind him had given way to a smoldering gray wildfire of decay, scorching and extinguishing every plant he had found so captivating, rotting every tree that had looked so unyielding, draining every pond and waterfall which he never thought would dry. The corrosion was coming straight for him, erasing his steps on the grass. In the far right corner, a plum tree was shriveling fruit to trunk.

Yep. "Fuck no."

Jisung had enough practice running from his problems to know how to truly go fast. But to outrun an entire Thanos-snapping wildwood took a certain amount of stamina that he wasn't too sure he had. He couldn't seem to stop tripping over thrashing roots, catching his boots in the tiniest of craters. He reached out to the earth and felt

nothing- no connection, no response. *I can't control it.* Somehow the realization was even scarier than the possibility of disappearing with everything else.

He ran, and as he did, he saw them, visions of suffering: Changbin being pulled under by strangling figs, Minho and Chan tangled up in roseless brambles, Jeongin's lifeless body blooming with poppies, Felix going down with a falling oak, Seungmin being dragged into the dirt like it was quicksand. *"Guys!"*

An icy soprano of a laugh crackled like lightning. *"Still living in your dreams,"* she sneered, dripping venom down his spine. *"You never do know how to act when you wake."*

A lash of hollyhock* snaked around Jisung's ankle and flung his body into a tree, letting him drop gasping into the dirt, all the wind knocked out of him.

Her shiny black heels came blearily into view as the hollyhock retreated behind her legs. Irene's lips curled into a cold smirk; unlike the rest of the land, her indigo gossamer lace pantsuit was fresh, showing patterns of belladonna* and columbines.* Straight, glossy dark hair was pinned back by silver snapdragons* to unveil eyes that were lined with winged mascara and malice.

"Years of living, and you still behave like a boy," she tutted. *"Don't you realize? All those offers I've made were so that I could save you from yourself."*

Irene tossed her hair, tilted her head to the side and *changed-* into a man with soft, sloping cheekbones, sad eyes, and burnished tawny hair.

"It's why they're always leaving you," Eunkwang told him, sadly. *"Everyone who bonds with you, everyone you cling to. Because as bright as you shine, you're always destined to burn out, even though you never see it yourself. You never know how to put broken pieces back together. You never learn."*

He took a step forward, and Jisung flinched back, pushing onto his hands like a backwards crab. But then he smiled, and his features melted, eyes flushed blue, hair grew and burned until it was red.

"It's embarrassing, really," Hyunjin continued, tone blithe and easy. *"Believing the impossible, failing to preserve anything you come in contact with. Wanting what you can never have."* His mouth curled, and he stepped forward. This time, Jisung didn't move away. *"And refusing to let go."*

Jisung's face went warm, hands stammered on the grass. "I-"

Hyunjin's yellow boot punted him squarely in the chest, back to the decroding ground.

"One of these days, the world's gonna give way beneath you, and you won't have the first clue what to do. With nothing to root you to the ground, you'll drown under the weight of it all."

The black earth grumbled, detonated, crumbled away into a colossal ocean wave rearing like the raised blade of a cerulean reaper, and crashed over Jisung, carrying him away.

Changbin opened the door to a dance.

It was like the ones he used to go to in his first life: the music crashed in your ears the second you walked through the door- Shake, Rattle, and Roll* in this case- and set in your bones before you had any idea, reeling you in like a fish on a hook onto the gym floor with the rest of the squeaking shoes and swishing skirts, leather and woolly sweaters rubbing shoulders for one blissful night.

"Get out from that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans,"

"Get out from that kitchen and rattle those pots and pans,"

Except he'd been on the outside of it not even fifteen minutes ago and he hadn't heard a sound. From what he had seen, there was nothing in the house to suggest that it might be a cover for some back alley social mixer where everyone collectively decided, 'hey, let's all dress pull out a wardrobe from sixty-four years ago to confuse Changbin.' The only thing he'd been even minorly suspicious of was the chandelier Felix had pointed out, and he was pretty sure that was too far of a stretch.

"What the *fuck*," he whispered, coasting along the sidelines. The disco ball hanging from the ceiling glittered like a second moon, flickering across the wreaths of yellow, pink, and blue crepe paper, all in mellowed pastel shades. People twisted and twirled in the bleachers for a little extra room, hooting at the miniature dance circles that opened up around the crowd. It was like the whole thing had been pulled from a memory, a noir film tape given color. There was nothing that could possibly make this real. *This has to be another dream.*

Suddenly, with the oncoming chorus, two girls grabbed hands, and Changbin was swept away by a couple of invigorated wallflowers.

"I said shake, rattle and roll,"

"I said shake, rattle and roll,"

"Shake, rattle and roll,"

"Shake, rattle and roll,"

On any normal circumstances, Changbin would have been dancing right with them. Right now, though, he didn't feel like reliving any glory days. He was still in the midst of figuring out what the fuck was going on.

The further he got, the more the crowd seemed to grow, filling itself with familiar faces. He'd glance to his left for a way out and spot Jeongin and Seungmin sneaking up to the bleachers with glasses of

punch, blink, and they would vanish somewhere else. Then he would switch off to the right, convinced he was seeing shit, and gawk because *damn*, Hyunjin was really pulling Jisung in like that. But then they twirled behind some other couple and disappeared just like SeungIn had before he could make a move.

A cheer went up in one of the circles, and Changbin turned; one flash of purple and black was all it took to send him running to push his way through.

Chan and Minho were a revolving storm, kicking and spinning and scuffing their shoes to the beat, pulling off a series of complicated moves that hadn't even seen the spotlight. If they had lost any breath at all, it didn't show- they matched each other note for note, step for wild step, meeting the other's eye with a smile on every turn.

Changbin couldn't help but laugh. No matter what world they were in, they would always find a way to show their love for each other and let the world know it. They could be on opposite sides of the ocean and still breathe in sync.

A flash of gray by the bleachers drew his eye out of the loop. Behind laughing faces, he saw the swirl of a flowy silver skirt, lighter than air. The blue flash of a wavy bob. The purple flare that sparked with her motions.

Changbin's heart short circuited. "Ryujin." He thrust himself into a run. "*Ryujin!*"

But when he reached the bleachers, she wasn't there.

Her place had been taken by the only boy in the room sitting down, scribbling in an old Moleskine- constellations. He swept ink black tendrils of hair out of his face to look up at Changbin with expectant, haunting eyes. "*You didn't forget about me, did you?*"

Yeonjun was the only part of his life he'd never been able to forget.

He shouldn't be here, Changbin thought, dizzily, like someone had clubbed him in the back of the head. *I shouldn't be here*.

Wavering, he stumbled back, not caring who he knocked into. And- *there*. Just behind that blond girl and her oily boyfriend: the exit.

Changbin made for it like he'd never seen any release so sweet, bulleting through couples, off the dance floor, grabbing the handle, stepping through the door, and-

No.

He groped behind him for the handle, found himself reaching for air.

No.

The sky was an eternally smog shade of red, as if it had been polluted with all the sins that lived below it. Clouds were ugly puffs of smog echoing with the thundering screams of the damned, being carried away by the guard dogs of the pearly gates to a special kind of torture. Changbin stood on the edge of a meandering lake- deep, dark crimson with a coppery smell. It flowed down an orange dust desert where the sun never rose nor set, and the fear never left, from the day you arrived to day you wished with all your heart that you could leave.

"I- I got out." Changbin's breaths came short, vision went hazy. "I escaped, I left, I can't be *back*."

Out from behind the clouds, their alarm sounded- an eagle's call, heightened and warped and set to the pitch of a sonic boom. Even years away from them would never make Changbin forget that sound. He clenched his fists so that they wouldn't shake, dropped into position.

The first whoosh of seraph wings came curving behind, and he missed it- just barely, a gust of wind grazing where his fist should have made contact. Then, two more- two opponents, one coming on

the left, the other head on. Changbin prepared to charge, but stopped. *Why can I feel something coming when there's nothing there?*

He was punished for it by a ringing blow to the side of the head, followed by another in an uppercut that snapped his chin up hard.

"What's wrong?" Yeonjun had gone after him, taking a spot as a spectator. His features, kind and delicate, had been twisted into a sneer Changbin had never seen. *"You fancy yourself a fighter, don't you?"* A gust of wind from the right; one strike to the head he managed to duck, but the other was caught achingly in the side, lightning-quick. *"Rolling with the punches until they stop coming. You think hell takes heroes?"* The combo came in the blink of an eye—one jab to the stomach that made him curl inwards and one to the back that knocked him onto his hands and knees, coughing. *"You don't fight because it makes you happy, not even because you have to- it was never about you."*

Two gentle fingers gripped Changbin's chin, tilted his head up.

"It's for them," said Felix in place of Yeonjun, a blazing campfire in the middle of a snowstorm. His hair fell in waves around his face, and from his back sprouted white, classical angel wings Changbin had never seen, smiling down at him from a heaven both would never reach. *"The ones you love."* Felix's hand moved to caress his cheek, making his heartbeat pick up speed. *"The ones you hold close and hold tight."*

Unforgivably, Changbin melted into the warmth of his palm; he had never felt anything so soft.

Blink, and he disappeared, and Changbin found himself leaning pathetically into thin air. Wooyoung looked pitifully down at him. *"Don't you ever wonder why you died so young?"*

Blink, and Ryujin stepped forward. Her smile was sickly-sweet. *"It's because even then you knew you weren't strong enough."*

A burst of flame took her away in a disappearing act. For a second Changbin forgot his pain, scrambled upright on a surge of fear-soaked adrenaline.

“Throw your punches all you want- it won’t be any use. So why don’t you be a good boy now, and just.” Beat. Tilt. Smile. *“Fall.”*

The ground broke below Changbin, and he collapsed into the pit of writhing souls that muffled his cries, pulled him down so that for once, he couldn’t fight back.

Hyunjin opened the door to a beach.

Very Hotel del Luna, he mused. Perhaps the great reveal would've been a little more surprising had he not watched it four consecutive times.

However, this beach was more rock than sand- jagged, hulking chunks of gray slate sprayed with sea salt scattered over sun-warmed golden sand like fallen meteorites. Little clumps of algae spotted the parts that were still wet, encouraging the spread of barnacle clusters that joined them. The sea, a giant, magnificent mood ring in disposition, had become a dark, churning body of aegean blue, speckled with flecks of teal that came to life in the foam of crashing waves on the shore, creeping over the sand and retreating again and again like a shy turtle.

Normally, storms were a turn-off for most people when discussing the matter of beach weather. But for Hyunjin, it meant he could breathe out, exhale in peace.

Nothing was better than a day at the beach.

He strolled easily out of his door, toeing seashells out from under the sand as he walked, closer to the shore where the smell of brine and salt was at it's strongest. Distantly, he remembered Chan or Minho saying something about this being a potentially dangerous mission,

that they should all keep their eyes open for anything that could have given cause for Peniel to call them past ass o' clock at night.

Don't know about them, Hyunjin decided, *but just a few seconds in that nasty house was enough for me*. If he could take a minute to appreciate the inside of at least one of the rooms, that would be enough for him. *Maybe they've even found havens of their own*. Glaring obvious aside, it made for a lovely day.

Hyunjin changed course for the dunes overlooking the ocean, hosting a craggy chair of rocks that looked to have a direct spotlight of the sunset. Picking his way up, he narrowly avoided a spot of algae and a determined little hermit crab, and sat back against his makeshift throne, relaxing under the glow; clouds streaking in whorls across the sky, billowing ash and smoke that blushed as it drew closer to the florid sun, which turned the sky into a flaming marigold masterpiece. *Even if I can't paint it, I can appreciate it*.

There were only a rare few beaches like this back in Portland; you'd have to drive for hours to Sauvie Island before finding one that wasn't too crowded or overgrown. This place managed to look like a cross between Willow Bar and the isle Hyunjin used to call home. *Maybe the others would like it here too*. They almost never got a beach day, and most mortal facilities weren't made to host such a lively coven. But here, there was space for Jeongin to run around, Chan to put up an umbrella and hate the sun from afar, even some of that beach aster that Jisung liked but could never find. They always found some way to make themselves at home anywhere.

Home...

Maybe it was just a thing with beaches, but every one he'd ever been to managed to remind him of that.

A high, giddy laugh out of nowhere nearly shoved his half-assed brooding session off the face of the rock.

"*Shit*," Hyunjin fumbled, grabbing around for anything he could pull loose. Rule number twenty-four in Minho's survival guide: get the heaviest possible thing you can find in your hands and hit/chuck at any threat before it can wrong you. (How To: Make It In A World That Considered Country A Viable Genre Of Music. It was a book he was working on).

Right as he was about to let the piece of rock he'd yanked out of some crevice fly because there was no way in *hell* he was going to face plant in the sand just because Doc Martens were terrible for rock climbing, there was a response.

"Hyunjin! Come on!"

"Cut it out, Yej, he'll come when he's ready."

Yej.

As in *Yeji*. As in the only possible nickname to give anyone with so little syllables in their name. As in the nickname she only ever let Jinyoung call her.

But. No. No, it couldn't be possible. They couldn't be in this house, in this nonsensical Hotel del Luna beach room with its own sun. They were supposed to be halfway across the world, enjoying their lives without him, *both* of them, not here where he could hear them laugh.

But there it was again. This time out of both of them, and he was hearing it a million times all over again- over nights laughing at each other, at weird song lyrics, at that fucking seagull who had probably drank a whole case of some poor fisherman's beer, and it couldn't possibly be anyone else.

"Guys." Hyunjin was moving before he could comprehend his own actions, rock tumbling to the ground, sliding off the rocks and ignoring the wet spots, Docs be damned. "Guys!" He stumbled gracelessly into step after step, over the dunes and back to the shore, where their outlines were outlined by orange light. And there

they were. Yeji's windblown auburn hair and Jinyoung's regal jawline, both of them fluid on the shore of the beach, shining in their smiles.

... for only a moment, until the next gust of wind blew them away like brittle sand.

Something in Hyunjin's heart fractured. He staggered, stopping just inches away from them. "Yeji?" *Is this some kind of joke?*
"Jinyoung?"

This time, the only thing he got in response was a violent rush of wind that clashed against his body like a wall of glass, so unexpected that it shattered over him, the knockback sending him floundering back, struggling to find his footing. Sand whistled past his ears as it blew, whipping his clothes around his body and hair in his face, which he couldn't even tuck away before two more gales came barreling at him, trying to knock his feet off the ground.

When he stepped forward, opened his eyes, Hyunjin found himself standing in the eye of a storm.

A flurry of swirling white, veins of rainwater and lightning, like snow in an inverted tornado. He could see into it- beyond lashes of clouds and a single iris of angrily spinning lapis blue -the real eye of the storm. Dark and knowledgeable and surprisingly calm, clear of clouds and wind, of hate, of anything.

"*Look at you,*" said the voice of his older brother, who was smiling cruelly, a leviathan lurking beneath a lost sailor, when Hyunjin turned around. "*Still waiting for his family to return all this time.*"

His heart surged, and he reached out for him, breath hitching mid-gasp when he mutated into Yeji. "*Haven't you figured it out by now?*" She paced backwards, a single step out of Hyunjin's range. "*We left because of you.*"

She dissolved, a flash of white and copper, and he saw that the beach he'd set foot in just moments ago was gone- taken apart. It

had been replaced with swirling chaos, cloud and shadow blending into one destructive circle around him, fencing him in. He could catch streaks of sand and broken bits of rock tossing amongst the furor. The eye of the storm had dismantled his safe place and kicked it up in a hurricane- it had moved beneath him.

A sparking snap of static crackled through the turmoil. Then, as if one of his old records had been swept up in the hurricane, the music started, lyrics warping in circles.

*"... Listen to the wind blow, watch the sun rise..."**

"Running in the shadows, damn your love, damn your lie..."

A boom adjacent to thunder made him jump- it produced another song that mixed with it.

*"... You got me runnin', goin' out of my mind..."**

"You got me thinkin' that I'm wastin' my time,"

"Don't bring me down, no, no, no..."

A sound like the crash of cymbals and ocean waves roared in his ears, louder than speakers, louder than bombs.

*"... Jolene, Jolene, Jolene, Jolene..."**

"I'm begging of you, please don't take my man..."

Despite their variety, he recognized the songs- all three were from the seventies, a time where he'd found himself, where he'd flourished with the sound. *Sing*, a tinny voice in his head urged him. This was supposed to be his element.

But the noise was too overwhelming- every lyric was colliding with one another, jangling guitar and howling wind, claps of thunder and drums that were frail in comparison. It made his brain pound against his skull like a rat fighting to free itself from a maze, made his hands

raise themselves to his ears in a futile attempt to protect them. He wouldn't be able to hear himself over it if he tried.

With every lightning bolt of noise, a new song wailed to make itself heard. In some, he could hear the others singing, forcing him to listen.

*"... Look into his angel eyes, one look and you're hypnotized..."**

*"... She's a killer queen, gunpowder, gelatine..."**

*"... I, will be king, and you, you will be queen..."**

*"... Don't blame it on the sunshine, don't blame it on the moonlight..."**

*"... I will follow you, will you, follow me..."**

*"... She's got electric boots, a mohair suit, you know I read it in a magazine..."**

Somehow, through the roaring winds, the discordant voices, and a record store's worth of music, he heard it: sultry-sweet piano notes tinkling below the high funnel of wind, a song that Yeji always denied liking.

*"I'll be fine, when you're gone..."**

"I'll just cry all night long,"

Except now, it was Jisung's voice carrying the words through its melody- low, compassionate, the way it was when he played his guitar.

The bastard stepped out as if summoned, right out of the whirlwind in front of him, blue hair and grunge regalia rippling in the wind as if it were nothing but a light breeze, eyes glittering like peridots.

"Say it isn't true,"

"And don't it make my brown eyes blue,"

Jisung's easy stride seemed unaffected by the hurricane, voice slicing neatly through. He couldn't help watching his crooked smile lace around him, freeze in place as he walked, crooning, *"Tell me no secrets, tell me no lies. Give me no reason, give me alibis,"* as if it were sending a message.

He pivoted smoothly behind, angled Hyunjin's face with slightly callused fingers so their eyes could meet just over his shoulder, tenderly curved mouth inches from his flushed face, hard swallowed panic, his own softly parted lips. *"Tell me you love me, and don't let me cry."*

That same hand drifted leisurely down to his neck, leaving traces of fever. *"Say anything,"* he murmured, *"But don't say goodbye."*

Suddenly, he closed it into a fist, just hovering before his throat, and tore, kicking the moment to the curb.

Hyunjin gasped and lunged forward, reeling. What the fuck was that? He pressed two shaking hands to his throat, which still throbbed like it had been slashed open- nothing. Not even a scratch. Looking around, Jisung was gone. He started out to call his name and-

He couldn't speak.

He tried again, opened his mouth to say something, anything, but only air came out, heavy breathing that turned quick and strangling and gruesome and all Hyunjin could listen to were ugly wheezes out of his own mouth because *he couldn't speak*. His voice made him strong, intimidating, something to fear, so much more than just a face you could admire as you passed it along the street. But without it he couldn't sing. He couldn't talk back, he couldn't do anything. *Without my voice, I'm nothing.*

Little by little, tiny voids were opening up in the funnel- eyes. Eyes that laughed, pointed, taunted the useless monster that sank to his

knees, letting loose a raw, noiseless scream that only he could hear.

Felix opened the door to a party.

Usually when someone mentioned a flash to the past, it wasn't always the best thing. But this? This was definitely better than the shady torture room he'd been expecting.

For one thing, the finest of Earth, Wind & Fire was playing, which was the easily best way to get any gathering up and riled. Admittedly, it was pretty modest- about thirty or more people had been crowded into a smoky little tinderbox of a room that was barely big enough for the bar that was crammed into the corner, the speakers hugging the walls, and the dance floor that had been made by clearing up chairs. Nevertheless, it didn't look like anyone was in the mood to care. It was another thing Felix had come to love about the world: if you couldn't change the way things were, you made the most of it.

*"Let this groove, get you to move,"**

"It's alright, alright,"

"Let this groove, set in your shoes,"

"Stand up, alright,"

He held back from jumping in right away, instead scanned the area while he tapped his foot along to the music, the way he used to when he watched it all happen from afar. Well, it was certainly a much bigger distance than just the corner of the bar- observing from the sky made for an expansive view, but everything looked so much *smaller*, and you could never get the full picture. It was like the way Hyunjin painted landscapes for Levanter: if you could imagine the scene, that was good, but only if you were right there in front of it could you properly capture the details.

And from here he could spot them: drinks splashing over the rims of glasses that the dancers hadn't wanted to let go of. Softly flashing rainbow lights from four disco globes that revolved in harmony in opposite corners of the room. Untied shoelaces of boots and sneakers and two absolutely astonishing mixes of both that looked like they came together. *Pastel-goth girlfriends*. Jeongin would have flipped his shit.

Even looking at a small function like this, Felix couldn't imagine what it would have been like had he stayed on the outside looking in, just wondering what it was all about. *All the days I would've missed out on, all the nights*. Laughter pouring out of La Merveille with the drinks, dancing to the latest hits, celebrating the happiness in the world not focusing on the consequences with people who were fine to do it right with you.

You were too good for it, anyway, Changbin's voice reminded him. Damn right about that.

Plus, if that really was Jeongin in the crowd, maybe he didn't have to drag the downstairs gang up from the first floor.

Felix pushed off the wall to get a better look: yup, that was him- no mistaking that elvish smile. He'd pulled Minho onto the floor with him, the two of them attempting some kind of slightly off-beat shoulder swerve. Hyunjin, Chan, and Jisung were cheerfully executing a country kick-line in surprising synchrony, like they specifically practiced it for small spaces. And then, right there- just behind the sneaker/boot gfs -were Seungmin and Changbin getting together on the chorus for that one Permission to Dance move from the second verse that they'd learned with each other and, judging from their wide-eyed elation, they'd finally gotten it right.

He couldn't tell what they were saying, but Changbin was laughing as Seungmin excitedly shook his shoulders, head thrown back and eyes crinkled up with glee. The demon bumbled backwards, giggling brightly, turning away from his dance partner for only a split second when their eyes caught across the room, like it was Pride and

Prejudice brought to the present and made queer. A smirk touched the corner of Changbin's mouth, nodding Felix over. *Come here.*

Something rattled in Felix's chest as he breathed out, like he'd swallowed a grenade clutching the pin in his hand. Forcing it down, he allowed for a smile to cross his face and stepped forward.

The hand that grabbed his wrist was clammy and, when Felix looked at it, covered in grime with shards of glass poking out.

Eric stared at him with hurt brown eyes, one black, both broken; there wasn't an inch of his skin that wasn't smudged with soot. His dark hair was still mussed, singed with fire that smelled like booze. Beneath his brown leather jacket, a canary yellow button-up hung low on his frame, tattered and charred from flames that still hadn't died. A bullet wound soaked through the thin fabric of his shirt, blooming red and brown, right over his heart. "You left me."

You told me to, Felix wanted to say, but couldn't. His mouth was made of cotton, unable to form a proper sentence. *How is he here?* "No. No, I-I didn't."

"You left me to die," Eric whispered, like it was taking all the strength out of him.

Two new sets of hands gripped his arms before Felix could finish his apology, and twin glares of white fanned out behind the backs of his captors - adorned with the feathers of a swan - that didn't even flap against the air before he was pulled skyward out of the party, up into a blinding colorless nothing.

At first, Felix could hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing but wind rushing past his face, his heart leaping into his throat like he was mounting the top of of a roller coaster. And then he was weightless, suspended in something that felt almost unrecognizably like flight before the hands clasped around his arms wrenched him hard to a ground of solid, shifting fog, forcing him to kneel as the world came into focus again.

Immediately, he wished it hadn't. The scene seemed to materialize as he remembered it from dreams that ended in a cold sweat: the fig tree in the middle of the courtyard old and massive as time itself, pews of angels seated as thousands and thousands of spectators in a circular marble grandstand to witness the court's sentence, fluffy storm clouds floating over, allowing for brief passes of sunlight. And then, marching in through the corridor entry taking the role of a judge into his own hands:

"All rise," announced Kevin, spotless in his sterling white uniform, red hair still neatly combed as ever. *"I, Brother 22398 of the 1936 genus, invite you to witness the condemning of Brother 91500- "*

"Say my fucking name, asshole," Felix growled.

Kevin's eyes dropped down to his, narrow with a mix of disappointment and pity. *"Felix, of the 1954 genus."*

"May he atone for his sins," the garrison recited, and seated themselves.

From behind his back, Kevin produced an entire vintage Bible. He didn't even look inside when he read aloud, *"'In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one.' Ephesians, 6:16. We live by this holy scripture that writes out our roles as heavenly guardians, our duties and our burdens, servants to man and our creator, blessed be His name."*

"Blessed be His name," the garrison recited.

Kevin dipped his chin in attestation. *"Unfortunately, one of our own was unable to be so strong and uphold such values. Instead, he succumbed to the forbidden fruit of mortal pleasures, and tainted himself beyond restoration."*

Felix clenched his fists behind his back. *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* He bit

it back with the blood in his cheek. *1 Corinthians 13:13.*

"He is guilty of," Kevin opened his Bible, reading out his 'crimes.'
"Consorting with mortal beings beyond the security of his station, indulging in the sins of greed, pride, and lust, denied his own association with our kind..." The angel trailed, cringing when he said, *"Loving a member of man."* The congregation gasped, murmuring to one another in shock. *"And ultimately disobeying the wishes of our creator."*

Felix dug his nails into his palms, refusing to show any sign of embarrassment. *I've got nothing to be ashamed of.*

"Here he kneels before you, garrison," Kevin bellowed, gesturing out to him with his blasted Bible. *"A reminder that no amount of wrongdoing is worth the price, no matter how sweet it tastes in the beginning. As His children and humble soldiers, it is vital that we recognize that the only love we need is that from our Father, from the very reason we breathe life here today."*

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever," the garrison recited. *1 Chronicles 16:34.*

"If our brother had confessed to his crimes himself, he would have been forgiven, as all are once they have bared their sins to the eyes of the Lord," affirmed Kevin, closing the Bible. *"But, because these crimes came to light under different circumstances, he will now face the consequences."*

Felix's throat squeezed tight with a vice of iron; even though he knew what was coming, he pulled at his restraints, wrestled against the hold of his captors. *Please, please not this part again.*

Kevin drew the misericorde out of the closed pages of the book. "Kevin," Felix pleaded. "Don't."

"If you think it gives me pleasure to do this, you're wrong," Kevin whispered, something adjacent to regret. *"But you have become a*

disgrace to our Lord, and you must pay for your sins."

Still, Felix fought back though he knew it was hopeless, though he still cried out at the slice of blade through the skin at the base of his neck, though he was lifted to his feet, but not to be freed.

"Farewell, Felix," Kevin intoned, hard and somber. *"Be earnest, and repent."*

They dragged him back kicking and thrashing, lashing out with words and curses and things he could say now that they could do nothing more to hurt him. *I'll be ready, this time*, Felix swore to himself, as the gulf of Grand Isle rioted in his ears. *It's already happened before; I have to be."*

But when Kevin pushed him into the void, he could see no sky. Instead, there was nothing- no dark, no light. Just nothing.

Jeongin opened the door to a winter wonderland.

When someone was introduced to such a concept, they usually envisioned one of three things: the taiga biome that people only knew from Minecraft, the magical land of Narnia which had been taken over by Tilda Swinton in Winter Warlock cosplay, and the forest of Arendelle, where a five-foot-four snowman frolicked about and sang about summer.

(Which, if you were Jeongin, also reminded you of the several times Stray Kids had watched it and, when it got around to *"But put me in summer and I'll be a-"* the whole gang yelled *"PUDDLE!"*)

In this particular scenario, evergreen pine trees jutted out of the earth dusted with a fine layer of what almost looked like powdered sugar. A thick, unblemished sheet of snow blanketed the ground- Jeongin's shoes were already almost ankle deep. From gnarled ebony branches, icicles sprouted in place of leaves, natural ornaments that gave the impression of glass but numbed the hands

quicker and colder than anything else on the planet. A frigid chill had followed him inside, the night's sharpness tuned up tenfold.

And it had been found behind a mythical purple door, which definitely didn't mean C.S. Lewis was shitting his pants in the afterlife. "The fox, the djinn, and the wardrobe."

However, this place certainly wasn't the weather for pink platform boots, no matter how powerful the aesthetic. He wrenched out of the snowprint he'd left behind, praying that the cold spot in his toe was just an aftereffect of standing in the snow and not any sneaky chinks in the laces. Shaking off the snow, he set off to wandering, because damn if he wasn't going to stumble onto a set for Planet Earth and not explore it.

The chitters of the birds floated down from higher than he could see- cardinals, he knew. They landed in the little weasel burrows- always perfect to steal from, always perfect to hide stuff in -protected by bushes of winterberries that, despite their appetizing name, were *not* safe to eat (Jeongin may or may not have learned the hard way from experience). It was a serene, blissful kind of quiet; while Jeongin wasn't usually one to enjoy silence, this one gave him more of an opportunity to appreciate the simple nature of it all, how it looked so big and felt so small and secluded, the tranquil kiss of sunlight on snow that couldn't be found on any other land, even the icicles hanging off the trees like the ones Jeongin and the other kits would snap off and duel with as makeshift swords, when growing up felt like something that would never happen to them.

A pond shimmered under the light, frosted over and frozen in time and place. If Jeongin came close enough, looked over the brim, he could see his own reflection- thin, colorless, but rosy and forever young. *Isn't that how everyone wants to see themselves?* Well, maybe not everyone. But there certainly many that would like remembering times when they were happy.

When he smiled at the prospect, a shadow chose that precise moment to move over the sun- a storm cloud, totally out of nowhere -

which effectively threw off his groove. They seemed to be closing in from every direction, an army of impending doom. For most, it meant coming rain or the Cullens, but for Jeongin, it meant so much more.

Out of the forest behind him sprang a startlingly tall girl in a red parka, hood flying off her head bringing to light bluntly chopped blond hair brushing her shoulders, like platinum and wheat gold. *Summerborn*. There was only one gumiho Jeongin had known all his life that could crash down a tree like that. "Jeongyeon?"

When his sister caught sight of him, she spared no room for emotion, no *long-time-no-see*, or *how've-you-been-these-past-six-years*. She grabbed his shoulders with the same intensity she'd always had, rooting him to the spot with aurelian eyes that matched his eyes. "*What're you doing here? They're not far behind- we have to run!*"

Jeongyeon fled, shifting into fox form mid-leap, ferried on by the wind. "Wait! Wha- *who* is?"

She stopped, cocking an ear to listen. "*Our day of reckoning.*" Jeongyeon *seized*, shrieking in a pain that shuddered through her body as the structure mutated, bones cracked, figure shrank. Her summer blond fur rippled like a rushing river, changed to a deep shade of midnight blue, striking against the snow, unforgettable in Jeongin's memory. *It can't be him.*

The raiju, blue wolf of thunder, howled into the sky, and it grumbled in response, shot a deafening crack of lightning that split the trees, impaled straight through his hide. Jeongin only saw Beomgyu's body sink to the ground once more before the winter wonderland was laid to waste.

From that single bolt, the forest had been leached of all life- all the snow had melted, leaving the ground cracked and dry and brittle, the trees leafless and stripped of their glory, the pond drained and barren, every plant and flower just *gone*.

The wind- now dry and humid -had picked up, taken shape of a whirling funnel the same gray hue as chaos, a fast-moving tornado gathering flames and debris and water and speed. *Definite no-no.* Jeongin forced his petrified legs to move and ran, only a few sweet steps away from safety before he felt the tug of his collar underneath his red sweater and the backwards pull of the ringed jet stream that lifted his feet off the ground and sucked into the spinning vortex.

His entire body turned into a Tilt-A-Whirl on steroids, helpless to the careening swells of the wind. His clothes whipped around his arms and legs, hair flapping every which way in his eyes. The final thought in Jeongin's mind was that this fucking tornado better not take his platforms too when the lightning struck him.

It was as though his whole being was burning up, except Alicia Keys had nothing on actually being blowtorched on every inch of skin with a ball of hot tinfoil for a mouth by a freak force of nature. And though he could have imagined it, because who knew what being struck by lightning did to the brain, he could hear singing. No, chanting- low, rhythmic, in perfect sync.

Motherfucking *shamans*.

I'm about to ruin this man's whole career, Jeongin fumed, summoning exactly enough strength to open his mouth as he was hit again- but this time, it changed him into fox form.

The hell? His body had never betrayed him like this. *I've never lost control of my own form.* Not even when he first started transitioning, growing into himself. *Why here, why now?*

But as the shamans continued their chants, unintelligible words ringing around him, lightning crashed into his body, quick-changing hands into paws in the blink of an eye, nails in place of claws, fur over skin that was still searing from the impact- power, his birthright exploding all around him, and he couldn't even control it.

The screams began to symphonize with the shamans, screams of voices he knew too well. He saw them in flashes- the others, his friends, his *family*, slashed by blades of fire, pierced by bullets of earth, choking in cages of water. *"No!"*

A flyaway through all the wreckage, even more of a disaster, was Seungmin breaking into orbit into his inner circle, a savior in a white-striped-purple t-shirt and purposely baggy jean shorts. He was looking at Jeongin like he was the only thing in the whole world that mattered.

He reached out- just a brush, just a second -to touch his face, bring him balance again like he always had, pull him into his space for one moment of comfort when-

Seungmin's eyes flared wide, body locked up, like the lightning strike had paralyzed every nerve ending he had.

"Don't hurt me," he breathed softly, the only plea Jeongin had ever heard out of him. Then, limbs gone limp, he dropped before Jeongin could even scream, sucked back into the current, all while the shamans hadn't even paused for breath.

Control this, Jeongin ordered himself, wrangling his trembling hands into a sphere, the way Jeongyeon used to. *She tried to teach you even before you were too scared. You have to.*

Yet when Jeongin squeezed his eyes shut and tried to concentrate on the lightning, all he could see what Seungmin falling lifelessly out of his reach, his coven in agony, all of it because of him.

Chan opened the door to a house.

Instantly, he knew it couldn't be real. *Not here,* he prayed, already feeling the desperation in it. *Anywhere but here.*

But every detail was exactly as he remembered it, down to the sun setting in the sky. The picket fences guarded a plot of begonias* and a squat two-story with fading butter yellow paint- they never could afford to polish it up. The blinds were drawn over the windows, patches of brown shingles missing somewhere in the grass; the brick and steps lead up to a carved wooden door, the only shiny thing about the place.

He'd come to find out that the place where you'd grown up was a lot more memorable when it became the same place your life changed forever.

If this is some kind of sick joke, it isn't funny. Not when he hadn't even seen it since Hoover was president. *But if Peniel called this late, he must have had a good reason.* This demon Chan could at least face.

Crossing up the steps, he twisted the glass knob and tried not to wince; it was already open. Inside, there had never been a setting so innocent- walls that his mother used to say were painted with mustard, dark wooden tiled floors with shaggy merlot damask rugs, lime green couch couch in front of the coffee table that was *just* far enough away from the fireplace so it wouldn't catch fire, bookcases filled with philosophy, poetry, Christie, Hemingway and that one F. Scott Fitzgerald one they kept around to make fun of the rich white people.

A total of five chairs were pushed in around a small rectangle of a dining table- it didn't always have enough food for everyone, but they made it work. And maybe, had Chan come a little earlier, he could have had the chance to sit down with them one last time.

Then, almost unmissable, a shift. From the kitchen, the shattering of a vase. "Chan!"

The sound of the shriek steeled him, struck something of a tremor into his undead heart. *It's not her,* he reminded himself. *She's been dead for seventeen years, you know that, you know that.*

But the relief only lasted five more seconds before he broke into a sprint through the entrance, making a beeline for his little sister.
"Hannah!"

Before he could even make it past the dining table, they were on him in a prowling circle- seven men, slicked back hair, dressed in high quality suits that most guys Chan had known only dreamt about. All of them had the same pale skin; all of them had the same fanged smirks.

"You're coming with us, kid," Junho rasped with a smile. *"To the other side."*

He lunged, rearing back with his fangs at the ready, and with a sharp stab of pain in the side of his neck, the scene went black.

The first thing he saw again were flowers- purple ones, spreading over gray walls and navy blue painted doors and *nope*, not this shit again.

Chan opened his eyes to the courtyard of Levanter, exactly as they'd left it days before. The sky up above was a blank, colorless slate- and for once not just because of Oregon weather. It was missing all of the magic and radiance that made it home.

A record player- the old one, kept in the storage unit -scratched to a start, and the music drifted to the ground level, softly as flower petals touching the surface of a lake, the type of big band music that people now considered classical, with a team of clarinets, saxophones, trombones and trumpets leading through a spirited, bluesy beat.

"Now that's just being an asshole," Chan muttered. Maybe if he'd gone in through a door, he could find another one that lead back out.

But before he could start for the entrance out, he saw him.

Up on the catwalk, Brian stared monotonously ahead, focusing on his course towards the stairs, step after robotic step. A purple

hyacinth* was clutched in both hands in front of his chest. Chan couldn't even *talk*, it was so weird. And right when he felt he might, Brian changed form into Bambam, who looked just as placid. *I've never seen him so dull.*

The weirdness went on from there: Bambam turned to Sana who turned to Yugyeom who turned to Jamie with a hand on the banister, all of his first friends, with each change in verse, changing from into one another.

*"I dreamed of two blue orchids, two beautiful blue orchids,"**

"One night, while in my lonely room,"

Jamie had made it halfway down the stairs before she turned into Jisung, who took his first step on solid ground as Changbin, who reached his sixth as Hyunjin, who completed the rest of the way as Felix, then Jeongin, then Seungmin, and finally Minho, who greeted him with mournful smile as he approached. He tucked the flower into Chan's breast pocket, cupped his hands around his no doubt bewildered expression.

"Don't worry, love," Minho whispered, as though consoling him. *"It was always coming."*

"What? Min, what is?"

Chan didn't get an answer, only the press of hands on his chest as he shoved him backwards into the hole that had been dug behind his heels, into - Chan realized as his back thumped on hard wood - the grave plot.

Terror clogged up his windpipe as the rain started, a drizzle trickling down from a view that appeared so far away it could have been coming from a telescope, projecting the memory back into his mind: wet forest earth, hands fastening around his arms and dragging him through it, his own terrified screams bouncing back at him in the

dark. "Get me out." Then again, louder, as he tried to grip the sides, pull himself out. "Get me *out!*"

But the face that looked down on him wasn't a friend- maybe the farthest thing from that that existed right now.

Zico grinned, the same grin he'd shown Chan when he damned all of them. "*Come on. Didn't I try to warn you?*"

Just like that, the coffin lid flipped shut, locking Chan inside of it. Panic speeding him up, he slammed his hands on the lid, pounded at it with his fists, trying to break out. But the thump of shoveled dirt thwacked louder; no one could ever hear a dead man calling for help when he was already in his grave.

Heart racing, Chan willed it to calm down, sucked in breath after breath to calm himself. "It's not real," he said through a wheeze. "It's not real, it can't be real, it *can't* be, it isn't -"

The floor of the coffin dissipated.

Instead of dirt, his back hit familiar solid shadow; he felt like he'd just woken up from a dream. *Was that all it was?*

Blinking his eyes open properly, Chan could see the room he'd been in- a bedroom, or what passed for one in a haunted house. Small bed with a wiry frame, grimy vanity, dresser that hadn't been opened in years. *I must've been sleepwalking and fell through the wall.* There was no purple door anywhere.

Oh, fuck. The *boys*.

Chan shook his head back into working conditions. "Think, Chan. Focus." Whatever hellscape they were trapped in, he couldn't just do it one at a time- if waking them up physically was even possible. "Get to the root of the problem." *I still haven't seen all of this godforsaken house.*

Like a rat in the walls, he tracked their twists and turns, peering through the shadows to get a look inside. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any working lights anywhere, so there was plenty to work with. He flashed past a bathroom, a boiler room, a rotted pantry, and- *Hyunjin*. He'd dropped kneeling in the middle of a shoe closet, hands scratching at his throat and jaw, mouth wrenched open in an anguished, silent wail. Chan had to get going fast.

Shooting down the left, he ran down the corridor, taking a shortcut through the kitchen to the living room when he found the heart of it all.

A perfect Victorian sitting area, all gold embroidery and royal blue furniture with pretentious marble appliances (really, vases, fireplaces? Come on.) and oil paintings of milk pale faces stuffed into constricting gowns. A dark spruce coffee table had been pushed out of the way for a glitching stack of reel to reel tape recorders, all rolling along. On the mulberry purple rug, surrounded by a swirling circuit of black sand, was an ash-skinned, skeletal husk of a man in a black bathrobe. The back of his head twitched, wisps of hair barely clinging to his scalp. His eyes fluttered beneath closed lids, mouth moving over the script of someone else's nightmare.

Stepping out to the walls, Chan grabbed the nearest object- a candelabra -and hurled it at the culprit's head, breaking him out of his stupor. He faced Chan with big, bugged-out eyes, clouded over with mist that could see him perfectly, looking more gremlin than man. *He created a mirage for all of us*. Now he was going to fucking pay. "Rise and shine."

"Fucking burner phone," Chan announced, tossing the BlackBerry to the ground. "The message hadn't been from Pen at all."

"But BTOB was here," said Hyunjin. "So they must've escaped and left it behind by accident."

"Leaving this... guy to fuck with our heads." Seungmin nudged the figure's head with the toe of his boot. In his throat were two bloody puncture wounds. "Of course we were the ones he decided to call up."

"Must've looked like an interesting bunch to him," Changbin replied, rubbing a pinch of the fallen sand between his fingers. "Sure explains the sand."

After waking up from their own dreams, Chan had corralled them into the living room to ease back into reality, view the scene of the crime and rest assured that it would not happen again.

"But I thought sandmen gave you *good* dreams," Jisung complained. "Like Rise of the Guardians."

"They do. But this one's demented." Minho stared coldly upon the creature lying at his boots. "A boogeyman- throws the sand in your eyes to sneak into your dreams and turn it into a nightmare. Scares the life out of you so you die in your sleep and stays alive through siphoning out your soul."

"You mean like these?" Quietly, Felix swept a mess of tapes out from underneath a couch. All of them were snapped in half, clinging by ribbons of glimmering film, named with scrawls on tape. Had they stayed under any longer, that could have been them.

"Let's get out of here," Jeongin muttered, so soft no one could mistake it.

Walking out the door, no one could look each other in the eyes; no one seemed to want to. Though they were close enough to hold hands, Jeongin and Seungmin stayed apart, keeping their eyes locked on the dirt. Hyunjin had let his hair down, trying to hide the marks he'd left on himself; when he caught Jisung looking, he jerked away, clapping a hand to one side of his neck while Jisung blinked furiously in the other direction. Even Changbin jumped when Felix brushed the tiny bruise on his cheek, grappling for what could have

possibly been "I'm sorry," instead ending up with nothing, leaving them both to shove their hands in their pockets out of angst and shame.

Chan reached out to take Minho's hand, just to let him know he was there, just barely grazing his wrist when the djinn flinched, sheepishly cutting him a glance. "Sorry."

Minho hadn't flinched at his touch in seventy-five years.

The coven trudged away in silence, the phantoms of their pasts still nipping at their heels.

Wherever You Go - The Avalanches

*Shake, Rattle And Roll - Bill Haley & His Comets

*The Chain - Fleetwood Mac

*Don't Bring Me Down - Electric Light Orchestra

*Jolene - Dolly Parton

*Angeleyes - ABBA

*Killer Queen - Queen

*Heroes - David Bowie

*Blame It on the Boogie - The Jacksons

*Follow You, Follow Me - Genesis

*Bennie and the Jets - Elton John

*Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue - Crystal Gayle

*Let's Groove - Earth, Wind & Fire

*Blue Orchids - Glenn Miller

*Red dianthus: Flower of the gods

*Foxglove: Insecurity, famously poisonous.

*Blue salvia: Wisdom, a long life.

*Hollyhock: Ambition, circle of life.

*Belladonna: Silence, falsehood.

*Columbines: Expanded consciousness.

*Snapdragons: Grace and strength.

*Begonias: Beware.

*Purple hyacinth: Sorrow, I am sorry.

+ if you guys didn't already know I used some of Jin's portion to kin assign 70s jams to the boys. Did you guess which ones were for who?

Enemy

Chapter 6: Enemy

A little more backstory on the guys + who tf Zico is to them.

Oh, the misery,

Everybody wants to be my enemy,

Spare the sympathy,

Everybody wants to be my enemy...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eldritch, Oregon - 4 weeks ago

"Let *go* of me!"

"Quiet yourself," Brad commanded. "You don't get to speak after deceiving us."

"Because I knew you'd never see me the same again!" Chan wrested an arm free from the grip of his holders, only for a second before it was yanked back again. "You don't have to do this."

"If it keeps the undead out from under our roof, then it'll be my pleasure." The human addressed his frat boys. "Keep moving, up ahead!"

The forests were impossible to navigate after dark, but Brad's flashlight paved the way. Bats and raccoons chattered from the cover

of trees, watching as a vampire was dragged thrashing through the dirt to a crudely dug hole with a wooden crate inside.

Brad's lackeys flung him roughly into it, holding his flailing arms crossed tight over his chest as if he was receiving a blessing. "Brad-Brad, please, look at me," Chan begged, gazing desperately past the beam of light being shone in his face. "I'm still the same Chan you took in. Please. You have to remember that, *please*."

But Brad, that WASPy son of a bitch, regarded him like a fly in a trap. "See you in hell, bloodsucker."

The coffin lid slammed down, clocking Chan hard in the head as he tried for one last protest. "*No!*" The locks had already clicked shut, tight enough to keep in the unliving and the very much alive undead. "Let me out, you guys, please, I won't hurt you!" He stopped pounding on the wood as his ears picked up a new responding rhythm: the thump of dirt being shoveled over his coffin, cutting him off with every scoop.

"Bury him good, boys!" Brad ordered the diggers. "We don't want this devil spawn coming after us in our beds."

The real horror set in as Chan's own breath came wafting back to his face. "No." And then he was pounding at the lid again, harder and faster and hysterical. "No, no, no, no, *no! Please! Please*, don't do this!"

It was too small in here; he couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't think. Speaking was useless- even if he yelled himself hoarse, even if they heard them, no one would hear. Already his back was aching, skin beading with sweat, hot tears streaking down his face. It was enough to make the dormant heart in his chest feel like it could start beating again, maybe for a short time before it stopped for good, this time without the weight of his life. "Let me out, let me out, I won't do anything, I swear, please, just..." Chan's fist knocked weakly against the lid, throat clogging up with a sob. *I trusted them*. How could he have been so *stupid*?

"No!"

- and Chan jolted up in the bed, resuscitated all over again. His hoodie was soaked, skin covered with a sheen of cold sweat, and his lungs couldn't be pumping fast enough, pushing out gasp after short, shaky gasp that did nothing to calm how suffocated he still felt.

The space next to him shifted, and Minhó rolled over, slowly blinking awake. "Chan?" Chan couldn't make himself reply, just snatch up the blanket in his fist, crushing the material in a clenched-white fist, trying to forget the feeling of the wood. "Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

"I-I was- I saw- I couldn't-"

"Hey." Minhó pushed up into a sit beside him, now fully alert. Even Berry crawled out from under the bed, whining her concern. "Look around. Deep breaths, remember? Wherever you were, you're not there anymore."

"They were grabbing me, taking me away, I- I wasn't able to-"

"It was just a dream. You're safe here." Minhó squeezed the hand gripping the blanket, forcibly loosening his grip. "Look around, look at our room. No one's gonna hurt you here. You're alright." His knuckles softly brushed over Chan's cheek. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

With every breath that became slower and slower, Chan's vision started to clear; he could take in the threaded constellations above their heads, the ornaments of their travels around the world, Soonie, Doongie, and Dori still dozing on the loveseat, Berry jumping up on the bed and nosing her way under his free hand. Minhó was waiting for him when he met his eyes, welcoming him with a smile. "Hey."

"Hi." Minhó's fingers closed under his palm. "What was that about?"

"Some stupid dream, a- a memory I had. About those OSU assholes I crashed with in the thirties, when they tried to... y'know."

"Fuck. That again?"

"Yeah. Eighty-eight years ago, and I still can't forget." The soft circles under Minho's eyes were still visible, still drowsy from being asleep only seconds ago. "Oh, Minho, I'm sorry."

"Hey, come on, what're you sorry for? You had a bad dream." Minho kissed the bridge of his nose, thumbs stroking his cheekbones. "You know I get them too." Chan nodded, covering Minho's hand with his own. "C'mere. Let's go back to bed, okay?"

The door banged open, and Seungmin skidded through, breathing like he'd run a marathon in nothing but a white tee and flannel pajama pants.

"I need the book," he panted. "It's Zico."

It all started with a rainstorm that lasted Monday to Friday.

Jisung had been standing on the roof, using the scope he'd torn off the sniper to exact his rage on the land. "First, it was the coyotes, and now, it was *God* who *fucked* my basil."

"Minho, hurry it up that that spell already!" Jeongin complained. "The courtyard's gonna drown!"

Minho's yell bounded right over the walls outside of Levanter. "If you assholes would shut up and actually let me work, I'd get it done already!"

Seungmin, safely beneath the cover of the catwalk roof, held out a hand to catch the falling drops. "Hyunjin, why can't you just like, Katara all this and suspend the rain?"

"Because, Minnie, I'm not a waterbender," Hyunjin sighed. "Plus, judging from the forecast, I'd be singing all week, which would be enough to make you all take the rain over my voice."

"We'd never get tired of your voice, Jin!" Felix chirped.

"Oh, you're too kind."

Changbin had poked his head out of his bedroom door. "Jisung, if you're gonna yell at the forest, at least get an umbrella. You're getting soaked."

"It's for the *aesthetic*, Changbin. A very important thing for making your point. Also I did not bring mine with me." Chan underhanded one up to him, and the umbrella bloomed in black. "Thank you, Chan."

Minho strode into the courtyard, shucking off his raincoat and dusting off his hands. "As requested, I have now circled the perimeters of our home with enough black salt, crushed sage, and amethyst to turn a witch in her grave." He snapped his fingers at all of them. "Now make some room."

Chan and Jeongin stepped proudly out of his way, and Minho knelt in the center of the courtyard. Closing his eyes, he made a sphere with his hands, one hovering over the other. Both palms began to glow, and between them, a star was born. He muttered a spell under his breath, a spell that called upon the salt of the earth to protect his home. Then, Minho moved his lower hand above his right and pushed the star into the ground, as if reviving a frozen heart.

The sky above them glitched, just a second's worth of buffering, and then the rainfall cut off- instead hitting a domed surface that looked like an incandescent kind of watery glass. "Barrier's up. You're welcome."

"Thank Hell," said Jisung in relief, sliding down from the roof shingles onto the catwalk stairs. "Rain was starting to get in my eyes there." He root-swung down to the ground.

"Literally your fault," Hyunjin muttered with a roll of his eyes. Still, they flicked up as Jisung pulled his drenched hoodie over his head,

the blue t-shirt riding up on his spine.

Jeongin, ever the careful observer, stifled a snort. It was enough to make Hyunjin summon the water still left on the ground and whirl it into a rat's tail that zapped at his ankles.

Once Chan set the tray of homemade hot chocolates out on the table, there was no getting anyone out of the house. While the rest of Portland was getting waterlogged in its own shitty climate, by the power of witchcraft, Levanter and everything inside it remained dry.

"Checkmate," Seungmin declared, crossing his knight to Jisung's king. "You lose."

Jisung frowned, chin on his fist. "How the fuck did you do that?"

"Simple- your king was placed in check, and with my interception, you have no legal moves left to escape, so, checkmate."

"Huh." A moment of consideration passed. "Can't win if the pieces aren't there."

"Jisung-"

On the couch of the main living room, the board was flipped.

Meanwhile, on the catwalk:

"Close your eyes," Jeongin told Changbin, who obeyed. "What do you see?"

"Uh, nothing."

"That's what you mean to me, bro."

"Aww." Jeongin ran off snickering in fox form. "Hey, wait, you get back here, you little-"

In a beanbag, Felix sneezed into his hot chocolate. "Bless you!" A voice shouted above.

"God?"

Silence. Slowly, Chan walked into view, where he'd decided to drill down some of his spring reading on the roof.

Felix stared back, taking in the supposed image of a lord and savior. "I believe it."

Hyunjin, with the twelve different mice he'd ferreted out of Jisung's hospice room and into his apartment's doorway, paced circles with a stick. "I've gathered you all here because not only is it that arbitrary time of day where my dog has decided to hate me, but Jisung is, as pretty much always, wrong- you are not just innocent field mice, you are harbringers of chaos and I plan to bring that out in you. No, this is not an actual conductor's baton, this is a stick I found that I thought looked like something a gnome would use to stab you in the leg. Now, today I will teach you all to sing The Phantom Of the Opera."

Minho, overlooking the chaos, swirled his mug of hot chocolate. "Yep. This'll taste better with rum."

Halfway to the kitchen, the doorbell rang, suspending all action.

"Fuck," Changbin cursed midstep.

"Who'd be out here in this rain?" Seungmin asked, transformed arm shoving Jisung's face into the couch cushions.

"A lunatic who'll hopefully make a half-decent client," Minho replied. "Tame yourselves- I'll get the door."

While the boys made themselves somewhat presentable, Chan clambering back to the ground level, Minho opened the door to a man in sodden hiking gear clutching the straps of his rucksack like a

nervous schoolboy. "Hi! Sorry for the short notice, but d'you think you could spare a room for one cold, weary traveler?"

"Just so long as he doesn't drip on the rugs." He held open the door for him. "Get in here- hypothermia spares no one."

The traveler certainly tried to keep his promise, leaving as little spots on the livid Ikat rug as he possibly could. "I don't suppose you have vacancy, do you? Well, hell, weather like this, bet guests came flocking for shelter."

"Not really- either you get used to this kind of weather and go about your day, or you just stay inside. *But* you're in luck- our last guest left a week ago, and you can take her place, if you can meet the price." Immediately, he released his bag onto the ground, rooting for the safe spot in which he supposedly kept his wallet. Minho's eye twitched above his practiced customer smile as the wet stain on the carpets increased. "But I'll let you do that once you've dried off."

Chan dropped rakishly into the lobby, flicking the mess of curls out of his eyes. "Hey, there! Hope we didn't make you wait too long outside."

"Oh, not at all!" The man slung his bag back onto his shoulder, much to Minho's relief. "You found me just in time- I just hope it isn't too much of a nuisance."

"Hardly- that's why Levanter's here." Reaching over the desk, Chan picked up a clipboard. "What's your name, stranger?"

"Zico, no last name. It's kind of a Wiccan thing."

"No problem." The vampire finished jotting it down. "Wait, you're Wiccan? As in, familiar with magic?"

Zico chuckled. "A little more than familiar, yeah."

"Oh, thank *God*," Minho exclaimed, hand to his heart. "It's so exhausting having to put on a show for normies."

"I'm guessing that means you guys are affiliated with it as well?"

Minho and Chan slipped a knowing half-grin at each other. "A little more than affiliated," Chan replied. He fished out a key off the little copper bonsai branch trimmed with rose quartz and turquoise pebbles. "Here's your key- room 7. Just stay out of 4, 5, 12, 14, 17, 21, 23, 25, 30, and you're good."

Zico looked more than a little winded at that infodump. "Why?"

"Oh, you'll see." They shuffled him to the entrance, as quickly off the carpets as Minho could manage. "Zico, welcome to Levanter."

The sight they opened up to was considerably less disorganized than it had been moments before- more like a depiction of a thriving utopia made of eight otherwise unruly beings. Jeongin and Felix were on the grass, teaching old raccoon Gwendolyn that freeze-dried strawberries tasted better than Japanese beetles while Jisung launched another Skittle into Changbin's mouth from the catwalk while the latter lounged across the couch reading the script to *Rebel Without a Cause*, which of course the Eldritch library had. Hyunjin lead his blossoming choir into a shrill rendition of the opening to *Phantom* while Seungmin listened in safely from out by the door.

"A little pitchy," Seungmin called in.

"They're stars on the rise, Min, just give them time to shine."

Zico gawped, amazed at everything. "The rain's not even touching your yard! That's incredible!"

"Oh, it's nothing much," Minho said dismissively, allowing the stroke to his ego. "Just a barrier spell combined with some natural cosmic magic. No different than what you'd do yourself."

"And these guys," Zico trailed, taking a minute to drink each of them in. "Are they... long-term guests?"

Chan grinned proudly. "We're a coven, all of us. Aside from a motel, Levanter's our home."

"No way! Seriously?"

"It's much less exciting once you actually spend a couple years together," Minho added in.

"I bet it's not all bad. I mean, me, I wouldn't know, I've been alone all my life. What's it like?"

"Where are the mice?" Jisung asked suddenly. He'd gathered Gwendolyn in his arms, seemingly remembering the hospice he kept. Felix pointed to the open door. "Damn it, Hyunjin! You can't just take them without asking!"

"They're living things," Hyunjin jabbed back. "'Taking them' makes it sound like they're objects. Would've thought you would be against that."

"That isn't what I- what're you even *doing*?"

"Teaching them how to belt the classics! They actually sound a lot like Christine put together."

"You know Geraldine can't go past a middle C!"

"Something like that," said Minho to Zico, who looked to be a cross between affronted and impressed. "Sure you don't mind a little chaos?"

"Nope. Nope, totally cool with chaos," Zico promised, not taking his eyes off the boys. "Thrive in it, actually."

"Good to know," Chan shrugged. "So, how long do you think you'll be staying?"

"Well, at first I was only gonna be around for two more days or so, but with the way things are looking now," Zico spared a glance up at the glassy ceiling, how water seemed to merely slide off of it. "Would five days be alright?"

"Perfect. May I ask why the change of heart?"

"I just feel like I could learn a lot from this place."

And thus, for the next five days, learn Zico did.

Levanter continued as it normally did- with or without guests, the boys took it upon themselves to sprinkle a little bit of anarchy into every given day. Most travelers that stayed there often found it entertaining, which helped with the reviews. With the main room and the pantry open to everyone that checked in, it wasn't much of a motel more than an exhibition of the inner functionings of Stray Kids for as long as the viewer could take it.

Zico must have seen his fair share of shit, because he watched fox form Jeongin cough up an entire Kinder egg with the help of Chan whapping him in the back with a rolled up newspaper at eight thirty in the morning, sipped his coffee, and said, "Did you get a hippo?"

So yeah. He was cool.

On the second day, he spent the afternoon with them in the courtyard, watching their lives unfold.

"Where's he headed off to?" Zico asked, watching Jisung bug out through the main room sliding door.

"He's got a garden he tends to in the backyard," said Seungmin. "It's kind of a thing."

"He doesn't really *look* like the gardening type."

"It's part of his deal as a spriggan," Chan explained. "The grunge part came from after he joined Stray Kids. Took a trip to Seattle in

the mid 80's and never looked back."

Zico nodded, drinking it in. "You've all got pretty extensive backgrounds, don't you?"

"Yeah- it's kinda what makes it fun. In spite of how different our lives are, we all just ended up together here."

"And we wouldn't want it to be any different," said Felix brightly as he entered with a tin of homemade berry crumble squares. Seungmin grabbed two by the unholy fistful. "Oh- and would someone remind me to give one of these to Gwendolyn? Jisung said it's good for her cholesterol."

Zico suppressed another laugh. "Sounds like you've all lived here an awfully long time." He directed his attention towards MinChan on the corner of the armrest. "How long have you two been together?"

Chan beamed fondly up at Minho, who moved his face away with a playful nudge. "Seventy-five years and counting," he answered. "I was the first member of Stray Kids to show up here- Channie was the owner. I moved in, and he begged and begged for me to go out with him, and after holding out as long as I could, I gave in and said yes. The rest has been romance ever since."

"I'm pretty sure I remember a different version of that," Chan debated.

"Mmm, mine's better."

"This is just a glimpse of what they're like," Seungmin garbled through a mouthful. "Just give them the opening and they're insufferable. Chan's convinced that everyone who's ever come to Levanter falls in love with someone they meet here."

"And it's got a base!" The vampire argued. "Literally all my friends came here and found their partners- just ask Jamie and Yerin, theirs is the cutest story *ever*. There's just something special about this

building- sure, it looks like a stone asylum on the outside, but on the inside there's memories, foundation, and with that I happened to meet the most amazing man I've ever known." Minho squeezed his hand, positively shining with affection. "So I stand by my theory with pride. You guys just wish I wasn't right about *you*."

Cheeks stuffed, Seungmin flipped him the bird. "What're you talking about?" Zico pressed on.

"Given how you've been asking after every little happening of this place, I'm surprised you haven't seen what's right in front of you," Minho commented. "It's no accident that everyone's so close- they've all picked out favorites, if you know what I mean."

"Shup," Seungmin quipped, purposely choosing that moment to cram in another square to avoid answering.

"Favorites?" Zico enunciated. "Would I be able to guess?"

Chan snickered. "Don't think much guessing would be needed."

"Don't listen to them," Felix picked a square out of the tin. "We're just good friends, that's all."

The entry door opened. "Gee, Changbin you've been at the gym so long, I thought you died," Minho said loudly.

Felix promptly choked.

"I wasn't at the gym, I was at the store- we needed eggs," said Changbin, cloaked in a blue raincoat, arm laden with grocery bags and blissfully ignorant. "Hey, Jeongin!"

The gumiho poked his head out of Hyunjin's door. "What?"

"I got your peach rings!"

"Fuck yeah!" Changbin lobbed the parcel up to the catwalk and Jeongin- fully human -caught it in his teeth. "Thanks, Bin!"

"Ah," Zico murmured. "Interesting."

Felix swallowed hard, glaring pointedly at Minho. "Is it really?"

The blast of an church organ threw them off, echoed by the tremolo vocalizations of voices too high to be human. "Guys, I did it!" Hyunjin yelled ecstatically.

"Yeeeeaaaaahhhhh!"

A good, long chunk of everyone's Thursdays were spent in the sparring yard behind Levanter, either watching somebody fuck someone else up or participating in the fucking up of that someone. It used to be one more part of the already-expansive yard which held acres of native trees and lush greenery, plus Jisung's garden. But then one thing lead to another, several scuffles made one big patch of dead grass, which eventually was eradicated completely to make a recreationally sized plot where one could roll up their sleeves and slug it out with their buddy like proper civilized citizens.

Today's contenders were Hyunjin and Felix- the rest of the boys were filling up four rows of bleachers, cheering them on.

"I'm betting on Hyunjin today," Seungmin whispered. "After that glory streak with the mice, a rush of confidence always makes him stronger."

"My money's on Felix," Minho whispered back. "Under my tutelage, he's really starting to prosper in his magic."

They weren't betting actual money, of course- it was who was going to fix the main room dishwasher, now that it had broken for the third time. Team Felix sat on the left while Team Hyunjin sat on the right, with Zico as an unbiased onlooker.

"And this happens how often?" Zico queried, wincing as a blow was landed.

"Almost every day, or when we're feeling rusty," replied Changbin, not taking his eyes off the fight. "It's all for fun."

"That's *fun* to you?"

"Hell, yeah. Just as good to watch as it is to do." He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Take him down, sunshine!"

"Hey!" protested Hyunjin.

Felix giggled, sneaking a grin at the demon on the bench, narrowly missing a water missile shot from his opponent. Changbin didn't seem to wonder why- he was too infatuated with watching the angel leap out of the way of strike after strike, which Hyunjin laced together with weaving, snakelike speed.

Zico dared to lean in, now intrigued. "Does the water just show up? How does he fight with it?"

"The water doesn't come out of nowhere- it's got to come out of a nearby source," Jisung supplied. "And it has to be natural. Don't know where it is, but it sure works for him." At the wiccan's expression, he laughed. "If you think this is good, just wait until he starts singing."

"*Singing?*"

As Felix inched closer, orbs of light illuminating his fists, Hyunjin began to tap his foot, picking up a rhythm. The two sides of the bench edged together, cashing in a new set of bets.

"What song do we think he's gonna sing?" Chan interjected.

"He's been on an alternative kick these days," Seungmin wagered. "Maybe something in that genre?"

"Or we could narrow it down." Jeongin put a hand out, palm down flat, like he was discussing a blueprint. "He just started on his third

rewatch of Umbrella Academy, so, knowing him, he'll probably have a song or two from the first season in his head."

"But which one would be spar-worthy?" Changbin inquired.

Before they could put it to debate, Hyunjin answered the question for them.

The whistling intro was enough for them to pick up on The Walker*, get them cheering along for both fighters. Hyunjin somehow managed to keep his voice stable, shaping his weapon into a rushing pond-blue rope around him as the force amplified, the water glittering with sunlight and power. Even Felix broke out into a smile, despite his current objective.

"Oh, crazy's what they think about me,"

"Ain't gonna stop cause they tell me so,"

"Cause 99 miles per hour, baby, is how fast that I'd like to go,"

"So the music's like a power-up," Zico pieced together.

"Pretty much," Jisung responded. "He can fight without it, but it's never the same. Maybe it's the whole siren thing, but when he sings, it's just like... he can do *anything*."

"Anything?"

"I walk to the sound of my own drum,"

"It goes, they go, we go, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah-"

"OH!" the bench boys howled on cue as HyunLix charged, so loud it made Zico startle off his seat. *"Here we go, feel it in my soul, really need it, need it,"*

The way they fought was as if they were dancing in air, a rock meeting a skipping stone on the lake; both were fluid, both were

beautiful- Felix was refracting light every which way, and Hyunjin was a swirling torrent, matching every move like it was choreography.

"Incredible, isn't he?" Changbin and Jisung asked their guest in the same detached, dreamy tone, not looking away from the battle- or rather, its fighters.

Zico glanced between the two, knitting his brows together even more. "Interesting."

Interesting as it was, it didn't seem to captivate any further interest. After the sparring excitement had worn off, dinner was eaten and a dishwasher was set to be finally replaced, all of Levanter was asleep- or would have been, had Jeongin not snuck out through the main room.

It wasn't that the days just weren't lively enough, or that it was something he had to do every day. It was just that, *sometimes*, Jeongin had too much energy than anyone knew what to do with, and it wasn't like he was just some common fleamonger that would scratch at his owner's leg every time he needed to go out and do something. No- Jeongin was a destructive teenage bounce-off-the-walls gumihyo, so if he wanted to run three consecutive laps around all twenty acres of Levanter, then damn it, he was going to fucking do it.

Sonic the Hedgedog doesn't have shit on me, Jeongin thought as he completed the first half of his second circle, bulleting through the trees to beat the next gust of wind before it blew. Aside from being able to scare the Happy Meal out of a child's hands, running in fox form had that advantage.

The trees passed by in emerald smudges of paint, blending firs with pine and ferns and lichen and moss and clovers and hey check it even Jisung's fucked basil plant and *woop-*

"*Shit*," Jeongin gasped, skidding to a halt. A rumple of inked paper was stuffed deep into a bush, almost completely hidden by the leaves. *I haven't seen that here before.*

Shifting back into human form- because foxes most definitely did not have grabby-grabby abilities - he reached in and pulled the full fledged newspaper out of the clinging branches, opening right up to the front page: *MAN FOUND DEAD IN A LAKE. Woo Jiho, age 25, reported missing on...*

Jeongin trailed when he saw the face of the headliner. "What the fuck."

The dilemma was whisked away into Seungmin's room, where Jeongin personally hauled himself up onto the top bunk where his neighbor was sleeping. "Min." Sleepy groan. Harder shove. "*Seungmin. Wake up.*"

"I told you, Wonpil, I don't wanna eat the-" Seungmin's eyes fluttered open, flew wide. "Wh- *Wha-*"

Jeongin shot forward and clapped a hand over his mouth before he could yell. "Hi. I'm gonna need you to be quiet."

After some '*what the fuck are you doing heres,*' Jeongin successfully dragged Seungmin to the woods, where the newspaper was still in the bush.

"Look at it," he instructed. "The headliner'll be pretty familiar."

Seungmin picked out the article. He didn't need any moonlight to see clearly; wolf night vision did that for you. "Holy shit."

"Yup."

"That's- that's him? Are we sure he doesn't have a twin brother or something?"

"Didn't you hear him on the first day? 'I've been alone all my life.' Siblings *never* give you that kind of privilege!"

"So what're you saying? That he faked his own death and came to Eldritch? How does Zico look *exactly* like this guy?"

"I don't know. But I do think that the guy staying in our motel isn't who he says he is."

Seungmin set down the newspaper. "Jesus." He shook his fluffy bedhead. "I *knew* there was something up about him!"

"Sorry, what?"

"I had my suspicions at first- I mean, who the hell goes *hiking* in Portland when there's this kind of rain? He'd have to have checked the forecast before going. And ending up at our doorstep- he didn't have a car, a wallet, a phone, nothing. *And* all the *questions*- everything we *do* or *say* makes him curious. He claims to be a Wiccan, but he doesn't know what half the stuff in Minho's sorcery room is. Hell, I don't think we've ever even seen him use magic before. It just didn't add up."

"And you didn't think to tell me *why*?"

"Everyone seemed to be getting along with him so well, and- I didn't want you think I was *crazy*, or something."

Jeongin rolled his eyes. "Seungmin, *I'm* crazy. You're sanest monster I know. If anything, you just made this whole potentially scary thing just make more sense."

"... Huh."

"But if he's not Wiccan, then what could he be?"

"I don't know- he definitely looked too healthy to be a zombie. But I think we should stop keeping it a secret before something actually happens."

Unfortunately for SeungIn, they were a tad too late. For, while Jeongin had been on his first lap and Seungmin was still sound asleep, something had happened.

Felix had slunk off to the main room in dark sweats, hair disheveled in a way that was not meant for the public eye due to two previous sleep attempts that resulted in one drowsy failure. Pulling open the fridge, he got out what any reasonable being would consider a sufficient midnight snack: a full bowl of Lucky Charms, because who gave a fuck what would wreak havoc on your blood sugar if you couldn't die.

"You're trying to sleep, right?"

Felix almost dropped his cereal on the tile. "*Fuck!*" Changbin chuckled, that smug asshole. He was still wearing a t-shirt and jeans even though everyone had gone to sleep hours ago. "Jesus, Bin."

"Please, you know that windbag's got nothing to do with me." His eyebrow cocked mildly. "Or did you forget?"

"Never." He seemed satisfied with that answer. "You can't sleep either?"

"Not really. Happens most nights, honestly."

"You never told me about that."

The tiniest shrug of a shoulder. "Didn't think it mattered." Changbin glanced back at the cereal. "You know that stuff's the last thing you should be having at this time, right?"

"Are you judging me for my cravings?"

Another chuckle. "Hardly." His next thought pleased him much more. "But I guess if it means we'll stay up together, it'd be okay."

Felix's smile tugged. "Really."

"Yeah, really. Something wrong with that?"

"Well, no-"

"Did you have enough of me in the day to not want to know what I'm like at night?"

Felix's freckles caught most of his blush. "I just wasn't expecting you here."

"Do you want me to go?"

His voice had dipped lower, almost challenging. "You can stay if you want."

The smirk that crept over his face unsettled a prickly little cactus that tickled the inside of Felix's stomach. "I want." He sauntered over to the couch behind the kitchen and settled back by the armrest. "Care to join?" Felix motioned to his bowl. "What? No, I'm fine, just get over here."

"Okay, okay." Felix followed after him, seated himself on the other end. "Happy?"

"Very."

Felix occupied himself with his cereal while Changbin anxiously rapped his heel on the ground, admired the unmoving ceiling fan, pretended not to watch him.

"You were great out there," Changbin said finally, once Felix had chewed off the blue moon stuck to his upper lip. "The sparring field today."

Felix laughed, placing his mostly discolored milk bowl on the coffee table. "You don't have to say that."

"Come on, you were! I feel like I don't tell you that enough."

"And why's that?"

"Because I want you to know how I feel about you." Changbin didn't stammer, didn't try to re-explain what he'd said. "I don't want you to be confused about anything."

"W-" The cactus had evolved into a full blown tree. "What would I be confused about?"

"Well, sometimes people say things, but they mean another. Know what I mean?"

"Guess so." *Prickly, prickly, prickly cactus.* "You saying that you don't want to lie to me anymore?"

"Well, I can't promise *that*- everyone's a liar. Just depends what they're lying about."

He stretched, lying back, arms up, shirt riding up over his midriff. A swath of moonlight hit the bare skin, but instead of lighting it up, it *glitched*; lines of shadow and color where stomach should have been, like a damaged computer screen, like code.

Felix looked up, and Changbin was waiting for him. Arms folded over his head, biceps on full display, eyes locked victoriously on his. "You were looking at me."

Heat rushed to his face. "No! No, I-I wasn't, really, I just- *you* just-"

"Felix, come on," Changbin chuckled. *He's laughing?* "I'm not mad." Felix was just about to say, *I'm pretty sure you fractured your skin*, when: "You think I don't look at you too?"

All the air leaked out of his lungs. "...What?"

"I look at you all the time." Changbin's smile faded, expression went softly somber. "You just don't notice."

He leaned forward; Felix almost leaned away but his fingers grazed the cusp of his shoulder, setting off little sparks in the spot. "I like to look at you in different places- that way there's always something new." His touch moved to his hairline, brushing a lock away. "Here." The bone beneath his eye. "Here." The helix of his ear. "Here." Changbin searched his face, as if looking for somewhere else to burn. "You know Botticelli?"

Felix was still trying to remember what he'd been thinking about. "Not really, no."

"He was a painter, with a distinctive style. It was kind of about what his idea of beauty was. Always painted people like they were flowing through space, weightless and solid at the same time. Like this line," Changbin touched the hinge of his jaw, skimmed down the length of his jawline to his chin. "He would have painted it with a strong edge because he really liked dramatic, defined contours."

Felix knew what art was. Felix knew what words were. But in that moment, all he could say was, "A."

Changbin chuckled again, what *was* it with that *chuckle*, like he thought it was the most amusing thing ever. He leaned in towards Felix's stumbling heartbeat, flicked his eyes down to his lips and in that same movement said: "Run away with me."

PAUSE.

Felix's brain caught up with the rest of his conscience, did a full one-eighty. "*What?*"

"There's nothing for us here, Felix. They'll only drag us down, hold us back. If we leave we'll be free."

"Free from fucking *what?* Eldritch- Levanter's our home, Stray Kids is our family! Where's this even coming from, you *love* this place!"

"Not as much as you." Changbin's hand traced behind his nape. His face was full seriousness. "We can't stay here any longer, playing games, pretending the world isn't out there. We have to get out."

Felix's thoughts spun on a whirling top, flashing from the glitch to the sparks to now. "This doesn't make any sense."

Changbin smiled tenderly, like that was going to make everything better. "Kid," he whispered, making his grip on the back of Felix's head firm, "this is the *only* thing that makes sense."

He tilted his head like he was about to kiss him, like it was about to happen and end with a cursive Happily Ever After banner.

But Felix had already stiffened. Pulled back. "What?"

Changbin paused, opened his eyes. There was a twinge of annoyance in them. "What is it this time?"

"That... that name you just called me."

"What? Kid?" He laughed- it was clipped, strained. "Sorry. Slipped out. Did you not like it?"

Did I not like it. "Do you not remember?"

"Remember what?" Felix scooted back, holding onto the backrest for support. "Remember *what*? Tell me!"

Felix didn't. Because he shouldn't have had to. Because they both knew why. Because four years ago, he'd told him exactly what he thought about it, and he'd never said it again.

Sunshine.

Felix got up from his seat; he couldn't get far enough. "Who the hell are you?"

"Felix?"

Changbin stood in the entrance of the main room, absolutely devastating in messy hair and a black tank and gray sweats. He looked like the ground had been pulled shaking beneath his feet.

The Changbin on the couch simply sighed. "Welp, guess it had to happen sometime."

And, faster than Felix could have pinpointed, he lunged. With one shadowy strike, he knocked him to the floor and moved in on Changbin, who only managed to block the first punch before a hook got him in the side. He was out the door before either of them knew it.

"Fuck." Changbin winced, holding his waist. "*That's* what it feels like to be hit by me." But when he saw Felix getting up, he forgot it instantly, went to help him. "Are you okay?"

"Fine, fine, just- can't believe I let that *asshole* fool me."

"Was that... *Zico*?"

"Guess he's not Wiccan after all."

Pulling Felix's arm around his shoulders, Changbin gently hoisted him to his feet until they could stand on their own. "What was he saying to you? Why was he *me*?"

Oop. "He was- he was talking shit about the coven, the guys. Tried to distract me." Only a half lie. It worked. "I knew it wasn't you."

"How?"

He was too cool. Too aggressive. Too smooth, too perfect. "I just could. Plus he did this weird glitchy thing, and- nope, doesn't matter, we have to find him."

"Yeah." But because Changbin just couldn't let it go that easy: "How would I have distracted you?"

"Do you want me to make a list right now?"

"Fair point." Changbin shuddered. "Now I'm thinking of all the other shit he could've done. What if he went to town and ruined my reputation? Like, what if he kicked Myrtle the cat out of the gym? Or what if he went to the bakery and told them to stop selling taro stuff? Shit can get crazy with a doppelgänger." He caught Felix smiling at him. "What?"

"Nothing." *There he is.* "I'm just glad to see *you*."

Changbin's eyebrows lifted softly in pleasant surprise. His bashful smile poked at the corner of his mouth. "Thanks." He puffed out a nervous laugh, rubbed his neck. "I mean, I- I *think* that's the right response for this situation."

"Yup, you're good."

They stood there for a sweet, shifting moment, each taking the other in, completely clueless as how to stop despite knowing they had to.

"Zico," they blurted in remembering unison.

"Right."

"Yeah."

Changbin bounced on the balls of his feet, shot a finger gun behind his shoulder. "I'll take the first shift, you get reinforcements?"

"Sounds good," Felix agreed quickly. "Be careful."

"Always am."

Felix parted right out the outskirts of the inner circle, and Changbin headed into the courtyard, fists ablaze with darkness. "I know you're out here, Zico!"

"*Bin!*" Felix hissed. He was by doors 4 and 5; both were open. "Seungmin and Jeongin are gone."

Changbin nodded to the entrance- he could take it from here. The minute Felix was out the door he fixed his focus back on the shadows. "Come on, asshole, show yourself!"

They rumbled with laughter. "Oh, Binnie." The voice was deep, rich, touched by an accent he'd grown to adore. "All that anger." It moved to the left, Changbin moved with it. "All that love." Felix walked out from the top corner, smiling devilishly. His eyes were too bright, almost yellow instead of their usual warm honey brown. *Fool's gold*. "This is going to be fun."

"So this is what you really are." Changbin dropped into position. "A skinwalker."

"The lore is very insufficient," ZicoLix admitted. "We can turn into a lot more than just animals, as you've learned."

"And so you decide to bring your business into our coven. Of course."

"You were all more than willing to let me in."

"But you're not gonna let me regret it, are you?"

His lip curled. "So you know something after all."

Growling, Changbin surged for him. And Zico, in spite of his unwillingness to take part in any fight at the sparring benches, proved to be quite the challenge in return.

For starters, he'd been awake longer, leaving him more alert and active in his senses. He had been around long enough to know his surroundings almost as well as Changbin did, know where to jump and retreat and land safely. And then the fucker was fast- really fast, like *unfair* fast. He moved almost alarmingly like Felix, weightless as

the sun glancing over the surface of a lake, met his punches with blasts of light, highlighting their faces under the cruel night and reminding Changbin that this wasn't another sparring match, that this wasn't the angel he knew. *No matter how well he wears his face.*

"You seem distracted," ZicoLix noted as Changbin ducked another punch, bobbed backwards. "After all that talk, I would've thought you'd love a duel like this."

"You don't get to talk to me." He feinted, aimed another hook. "Not after what you did."

"Oh, please. You should've seen Felix while I was with him- he certainly wasn't complaining."

Changbin threw a punch out of fury, hit thin air when the skinwalker moved deftly to the side. "What did you do to him?"

"Relax, I didn't hurt him. Well, at least before you came in." He chuckled. "But if you hadn't, who knew what could've happened?"

"He knew you weren't me!"

"But he wished I was." ZicoLix grinned behind blinding light, illuminating freckles that weren't his.

"*Shut up.*" Changbin pulled out another combo: an uppercut to the stomach, a cross that cracked his head sideways. "You don't know what you're talking about."

ZicoLix stumbled back against the armrest of the couch, scoffed, swiped the blood off his lower lip with his thumb. Which probably shouldn't have been as hot as it was. "Don't I?"

In the softest blink of an eye he'd charged forward, sent a flying kick at Changbin's side, a punch he caught in the shoulder. "It doesn't take a genius to see it, you know." He advanced, forcing him to move back. "How you watch him, how you act when he walks into a

room." ZicoLix aimed a blazing punch at his throat, with Changbin blocked with crossed forearms. Throughout the battle, he hadn't stopped smiling. "How you look at me now, wishing you had it in you to stick a bruise on this face." He drew back, launched another that Changbin shoulder-rolled out of the way to avoid. "Why do you think I chose this form?" ZicoLix gestured grandly to himself. "I knew it'd get to you."

"But you're not *him*," Changbin spat, honing in on that fact as he looked his body double in the face. "You never will be."

ZicoLix shrugged. "Be that as it may, I know a couple things he doesn't. That you've been looking. And," he moved forward again, quick painted motion, so fast Changbin couldn't even react as he pivoted behind him, gripped his chin instead of attacking, jerked his head so he could see every gorgeous, painstaking detail of Felix's face, smirking viciously into his. "You like it."

Changbin felt his breath catch and- nope, fuck heart palpitations, *it wasn't him*. Before ZicoLix could twist his own head to the side, Changbin drove an elbow hard into his face, socked him doubling over in the stomach, and hurled him by the arm straight into the catwalk balusters.

His form flickered, body changing colors like a hologram. *So that's what Felix meant about glitching*. The roach of a bastard pulled himself up by the railing, chuckling shakily. "Temper, temper," he chided. "Something you should work on. Or maybe not- from what I know about the angel, he thinks it's pretty hot."

"Oh, get real." Then: "Really?"

ZicoLix blinked. "Oh my God."

"Right."

The skinwalker threw himself confidently into the air, but ended up starfish-flopping onto the couch like a cartoon animal. "Jeez. An

angel that can't fly? How pathetic is this guy?"

"Don't you talk about him like that!" Changbin hauled him up before he could rise- one hand fisted in the front of his shirt, the other raining blows anywhere he could see. He drove a knee into ZicoLix's stomach, shoved him down, knelt over him to finish it off.

"No, no, no!" He begged, blood seeping out of his nose, mouth, already beginning to dry up into brown crust, staining his freckles with it's spray. His nose was unnaturally crooked. "Don't do it. Don't do it, *please*." In the dark light of Changbin's shadow, his eyes seemed to have reverted to his normal color. "Please."

Changbin's fist hung suspended in midair, breathing hard, taking him in. It was stupid. Worthless. Useless. Here and now was where he ended this whole thing. He knew it wasn't really him. *But how can I?*

ZicoLix's plea flattened into a smirk. "Amateur."

He kicked up, shoving his boots into Changbin's abdomen, launched back to his feet, and with a fistful of stolen brilliance, sent him flying into the second floor wall.

Changbin rolled pitifully out of the dent he'd made, coughing up the air he'd lost at a flabbergasted Seungmin's feet. "What the shit happened to *you*?"

"Zico," he groaned. "Not Felix."

"I know *that*- who do you think got Jeongin and I here? He's going to wake up Hyunjin now." Seungmin spared a wave at ZicoLix, whose bloodied face was already creasing into a frown. "So he's a skinwalker."

"Sorry I couldn't finish the job."

"You got thrown into a wall by a con wearing the face of the guy you like- you did fine." Jeongin dropped down from the roof in fox form,

nosed his way under Changbin's arm. "Do you know how we can defeat him?"

"Get Minho and Chan. Tell them- *ah*." Changbin winced, brought a hand to his ribs. "Tell them to get the book."

"The book? What book?"

"They'll know what it means." The demon let Jeongin ferry him away. Seungmin, with no other option, went to room 17.

ZicoLix glowered. "Oh, no you don't, wolf pup." He started out, preparing to pursue.

"*Hey!*"

A vine lashed out of the shadows around his wrist, spun him back around. Jisung was already walking out to face him. "Your fight's here."

ZicoLix looked over him coolly. "I see they've brought in the sub."

"You'll find I'm a lot more than that."

In a simple dark purple hoodie, he didn't look very intimidating. But Zico accepted the threat. "I'll bite." He cracked his neck side to side, ran his hair back; as he did, his form flickered, changed color, remolded itself like clay and painted over old colors with new. When he stretched out, Hyunjin was standing where Felix had been, clean and energized and fresh as new rain. "*Ah*. Yep. Nothing like a new form to gloss over those old wounds." He donned his vile grin, blue eyes turning to crescents. "Let's see how you do with this one."

Jisung raked over it, regretting every incriminating thing he'd said in the last twenty-four hours. "Asshole," he muttered, and charged.

It was easy to see why Changbin had had such a tough time; the similarity Zico- ZicoJin? ZicoJin - bore to the siren was almost scarily identical. *He must've taken notes while watching them fight.* Jisung

let a root fly out of the ground, and ZicoJin grabbed it like a rope and used it to swing himself in close next to him, waving the tips of his fingers in hello. *And how we react to them.*

Jisung summoned three more, creating space between himself and his opponent, who couldn't seem to leave him alone now that he'd gotten him. With every shot he missed, ZicoJin had sidled out of the way, and with every one he landed, he seemed to use the anger to propel him onward. Jisung sent all three veering into his legs, and he jumped as if it were a game, only slightly tripping on one, which he responded to by tucking and rolling into a three point landing.

"Show off," Jisung told him.

ZicoJin smiled. "You seemed pretty into it."

Jisung called to the roots of the morning glories scaling the walls, used them like his own curved blades that slashed out at Hyunjin's doppelgänger, slicing open his arms and face with knifelike cuts. He coiled them around his wrists and, with two sturdy roots, delivered two drilling jabs- one to the sternum, one to the nose - and threw him back against the wall.

ZicoJin coughed violently, shaking the debris out of his hair. "Jeez. You fucks really like doing that."

"What can I say? We like to have a little fun even when we fight."

ZicoJin's mouth quirked. "Guess that means I should get serious." He sauntered back into the light, stroking his chin for show.

"Question is, what should I do? It should be something... *incredible.*"

Face twisting into a scowl, Jisung made the valerian by ZicoJin's boot shoot up, empowered by roots, and clock him upside the head.

ZicoJin recoiled, hand pressed to his cheek, a hue of red tinging his lower lip. "Thanks for the inspiration." His foot began to tap- a brisk

drumbeat, reflected by an electric guitar. When he moved, it was to a new song.

*"Time, time, time, see what's become of me,"**

"While I looked around for my possibilities,"

What the fuck kind of bullshit *was* this? *He even sounds like him.* He sang, and it was like Jisung could hear the rest of the song emanating from his voice, every key, every chord, every instrument. He sang, and it was all he could hear. ZicoJin moved with new, invigorated strength, having found his own water source to fight back with. Every motion made like he was dancing to the music.

"Look around,"

"Leaves are brown,"

"And the sky is a hazy shade of winter,"

Jisung focused hard, trying to find any differences between Hyunjin and the shifter in front of him. *Well, both currently hate my guts, so I guess that's not really helpful.* But, no matter what, Hyunjin rarely ever smiled at him like *that*- like he was actually enjoying his company.

"What's wrong?" ZicoJin asked, water swirling around him. "People are usually more adoring when I possess the form of a siren."

Jisung shrugged. "Guess I'm just immune."

The excuse must have not been very convincing, because ZicoJin merely narrowed his eyes. "Or you're already weak."

Sinking low like a prowling cat, he leapt for him- dropping the water, past the vines, touched ground and sank low, sweeping his leg out and knocking Jisung off his feet. He couldn't even rise up again before ZicoJin was on him, knees pinning his wrists, forearm over his shoulders and sternum, rendering him unable to move, summon so

much as a weed for defense, trapped underneath. Jisung strained against his hold, glared into those wicked eyes like he had so many times before, braced for a punch when his other hand reared back-

- and froze when it caressed his cheek, delicate as spring grass.

ZicoJin stared him sinuously down, red hair falling like a shower of alstroemeria* petals around his face. His smile was triumphant, radiant, as intoxicating as it was infuriating. *Just like his*. "Oh, I see," he murmured, no doubt getting a kicking out of what was clear on his expression. "This is what you want, isn't it?" He chuckled maddeningly. "Naughty boy."

Jisung gritted his teeth, bucked against the weight on top of him. "Oh, quit struggling," ZicoJin continued blithely. "You should probably take what you can get, because really." He lowered his face to Jisung's and snarled, in a frighteningly perfect imitation of Hyunjin's voice: "Why would I ever settle for you?"

"I should've *known* something was up with him," Minho grumbled, rolling out of bed with Chan. "I mean really, the fuck kind of Wiccan doesn't know what yarrow is? *Everyone* knows what yarrow is!"

"Seriously, though, what's the book?" Seungmin asked, trailing after them into a dark corner. "Changbin sort of just told me, and I went along with it."

"Something we should've told you about a while ago," Chan responded grimly. He took Minho's hand, Minho took Seungmin's, and they traveled through it.

They walked into Minho's sorcery room- a dusky place full of wall to wall shelves of stones and bundles of herbs and animal skulls, bottles of Jamie's home-brewed moon milk. A Devil's trap had been sewn onto a specially made rug. Glass bottles labels varied from classics like 'bat's wing' and 'dragon's blood' to abominations like

'bloody fingers' and either 'penis enlargement' or 'powdered hoof.' Seungmin probably needed glasses.

Chan crossed the room to a chest that looked like it had been stolen from Jack Sparrow's dirty hands and produced a leather-bound tome stuffed with notes and leaves and a few long-dead flower petals from the meadow. He tossed it to Minho. "Seungmin, what'd you say he was again?"

"A skinwalker." Minho flipped through the pages; they seemed to be alphabetically organized. "Now what the hell is that book?"

Minho didn't stop, but his scowl deepened. "I stole it from a hunter's lair back in the 70's," he confessed. "We try to use it as little as possible, but." He grimaced. Even Chan's shoulders seemed to droop. "Whenever there's a monster that can't be dealt with any other way, we use it to find out how we can deal with it."

Seungmin's gut clenched. He supposed he'd been expecting it. Seeing what Zico had done to Changbin justified it enough in his mind. "Jisung's keeping him busy, but I don't know how long we have."

Minho traced a finger down the page. "We need silver," he muttered. "Chan?"

"On it." Chan opened up a briefcase full of silverware that looked like it had been stolen from multiple places. He pulled out a dagger and threw it over his shoulder, which Minho caught hilt first. "Let's smoke this traitor."

Jisung opened his mouth, either to answer or close it again like a dumbass, he didn't know. But when he saw MinChan and Seungmin pacing down the stairs, he knew they had a plan after all.

"Fine," he replied smoothly. "But only if you meet me six feet under."

With that, Jisung slackened, turned his palms flat onto the ground, and melted into the grass.

ZicoJin scrambled back onto his feet. "*What the fuck*, what the fuck."

"*SABOTAGE!*"

He turned in flawless time to see Jeongin's pink platform boot jump off the roof and plant its print firmly in his face. Cartwheeling out of the way, he nodded Jisung his cue.

Jisung, who'd sprouted on the other side of the courtyard, thrust his hands into the ground and sent off a detonation of roots all around ZicoJin, latching them around his wrists and body and yanking him hard to his knees. The rest of the boys came from different angles, joining together in front of the intruder to stare him down.

"It's over, Zico," said Hyunjin. "Now take off my fucking face, it looks terrible on you."

The skinwalker started to protest, then gave in, reverting back to the hiker they'd seen walk in on Monday. "We know that's not your real face either," Seungmin spat.

Zico smiled sweetly. "As fun as it'd be to break your brains a little more, it seems as though we're on a tight schedule."

"Enough games," Chan snarled. "We let you into our home, and you tricked us. Why?"

"Well, isn't it obvious? I wanted to get in on the bounty."

The answer settled like mist on the ground. Furrowed brows met bewildered frowns. "Wait," the skinwalker butted in, looking at all of them with budding incredulity. "You guys didn't know?"

"Know what?" asked Felix.

Zico's mouth dropped open. As if it was the most hilarious thing he'd ever heard, he started laughing; not the genial chuckles he'd shown before, but real out-of-control laughing. In his earthen straitjacket, he looked borderline insane. "Oh my," he gasped, wheezing for breath. "Oh my hell, you're *serious!* *Whoo!* And I thought you guys were dumb before, but *damn*. You don't even know!"

"Fucking know *what?*" Changbin demanded.

Zico pursed his lips to keep from laughing any more. "Well, I suppose if I'm on my deathbed, I should tell you." He cleared his throat, preparing for a great speech. "Boys, I'll have you know that I am one of the many contenders for the rewards that have been put on your profitable little heads."

"Rewards?" Jisung enunciated. "For *us?*"

"Who's got the biggest?" Jeongin asked.

"*Jeongin!*" Chan hissed.

"If you really want to know, Minho," Zico replied. "Not too surprising, given you're the only djinn around for states."

Minho himself had gone almost as pale as Chan. "How would we know you're telling the truth?" Seungmin challenged, a quaver to his voice. "We've never done anything to anyone."

"And that's where you're *dead* wrong, wolf pup." Zico sniggered. "See, you know all your 'extensive backgrounds?' Well I did my research- and enough to know that not one of you got here without some red in your ledger. You guys've made a lot of enemies from your past, and fucking angry ones, from the sound of it. And hey, spriggan?" He looked up at Jisung. "Irene says hi."

The words connected like a punch. "Fuck," Jisung whispered, horror lacing his voice.

"But- how does anyone outside of Eldritch know who we are?" Changbin stammered.

"Have you even been *listening*, imp? They're all over the place! They've been looking for the shitheels who wronged them since the dawn of time! Everybody wants to be your enemy- shamans, angels, earth monsters, even a fucking *warlock*. I was just hired to find out what the fuss was all about."

"So you're, what? Some kind of assassin?" Hyunjin asked.

"I prefer the term 'bounty hunter.' I was called up, told about you guys, went to find you, did 'cause I'm *awesome*, and what do I find?" Zico used his head to motion towards all of them. "That they're all the most soft-bellied, weak-minded, cowardly sons of bitches I've ever met."

Jeongin kicked the sole of his shoe into the other side of the skinwalker's face. But the two-face must've already accepted his fate, because he just went right on talking. "They hole up in some small town, move into an off-road motel, band together, and think they're *safe*? It was the easiest job I've ever taken, infiltrating this place! You're all so vulnerable, so careless, so stupid in love with each other that you can't even see what's right in front of your faces!" The boys shifted between anger and humiliation, zeroing all of it on him. "I don't think you even realize how close I was to killing all of you. I could've done it nights ago and been out of here just like *that*." Zico glanced down at where his hand still couldn't move. "Well, insert finger-snap, but you get the point."

"Then you take that to your fucking grave too," whispered Chan, stepping aside for the glint of silver that flashed out of Minho's sleeve.

Zico grinned, a poisoned apple rotting off the tree. "Just saying. It's all coming back to you."

Minho's dagger plunged straight up through his submental, jolting a shock through his body. In the confines of his root shackles, he tremored through forms- a milkman, a babushka, a suspiciously Pinhead looking individual, the face of God and Lucifer, until they all glitched, short circuited, blended together into dreams and nightmares and nostalgia and truth and the beginning of the end until it all became Chan, slowly bleaching of color around a soundless broken scream as the roots dragged him under, into the dirt, and out of sight, a single edelweiss* flower in place of the bounty hunter.

"Everybody wants to be our enemy," Seungmin echoed. It resounded with the clap of thunder and awakening patter of the night's first rain that sealed their fates.

Enemy - Imagine Dragons, JID

*The Walker - Fitz and The Tantrums

*Hazy Shade of Winter - Gerard Way, Ray Toro

*Valerian: Readiness.

*Red alstroemeria: Love, romance, and passion.

*Edelweiss: Purity and innocence.

Finesse

Chapter 7: Finesse

After unpacking All That Shit, our boys decide to hit the town. Or at least the side of the road.

We out here drippin' in finesse,

It don't make no sense,

Out here drippin' in finesse,

You know it, you know it...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eagle, Colorado - Present

"Hey, guys," Felix started innocently, "what day is it again?"

On his left, Hyunjin elbowed Changbin, who elbowed Chan, who sighed, "It's Tuesday."

The angel clamped his mouth tightly shut. Then, as if he couldn't take it: "Club going up."

"Oh, for *God's* - "

" - Damn it, Felix - "

" - *Why* - "

"*On a Tuesday!*" JiLix shouted into the night.

"I'm seriously starting to hate both of you more than I hate myself," Seungmin informed them.

Even before they'd made their way to Colorado, the Cloak and Dagger had been a planned destination. Recommended to them by Yubin, the Eldritch librarian who was renowned for having several adventures of her own, it was a kind of hangout for monsters in the guise of a roadside bar- sure, it attracted the occasional biker or redneck trucker, but they were mostly harmless.

At first it hadn't mattered too much whether they actually remembered it or not. But after... well, everything that happened with the boogeyman, they needed something to get their minds off it.

Inside, the air was pleasantly warm, tinged with smoke and the scent of lavender, heavy with the chorus of Fistsfight by The Ballroom Thieves*. It was tempered by dusky twilight lights that floated just below the ceiling. A bar manned by a girl in the baggiest flannel any eye had ever seen was tucked into the corner near the exit, which was currently being pushed open by a guy who was already holding his partner's hair back. Clusters of purple upholstery booths hugged the walls to make room for a pool table and the wide open space being used as a dance floor full of people who had either come together or never met until tonight, and were having just as good of a time.

"What did I do to deserve you?"

"How did you find me, I was already halfway gone,"

"It's like if The Wobbly Elm had a budget," Felix whispered to Minho.

"Like a murder scene," Changbin mused, nodding approvingly. "I dig it."

"So, like, everyone here's inhuman?" Jeongin asked, just for confirmation. "I could just transform right here and no one would say shit?"

"You'd probably get stepped on or whacked by a broom, but yeah," Chan replied. "Remember, no violence, no purposely making a scene, and if something *does* go down- "

" - we don't go it alone," they finished plaintively.

"Would it really be our fault, even if something did?" Hyunjin chimed in. "We are kind of the hottest people in the room right now."

Chan glanced at Minho, who shrugged: *he's kind of right*. "Well, still. Just keep your asses out of trouble and try not to let it find you."

"Us, trouble?" Seungmin mocked. "Why, we've never met."

Rolling his eyes, he waved them off, answering to a cheerful wave from Jeongin as they dispersed. "Don't even know why I bother."

"Hyunjin does have a point- most of the stuff that we get involved in usually just happens to us," Minho acknowledged. "Whatever happens, though, I am not doing it without a drink."

"Might have to count me in for that too."

Minho turned towards an empty barstool, starting to flag over the bartender when the song changed- soft piano melody over a tropical intro, a song they both knew. Chan reached for his hand- stopped halfway through, and tapped his shoulder instead. When he faced him again, he offered up his hand, slipped on a charming smile. Minho laughed softly through his nose, shaking his head, but responded all the same by accepting it, letting him drag him to the dance floor.

"No soy traficante,"

While Chan's rules had been explicitly not to draw attention, when those two started dancing, people just couldn't help themselves. It was decades of partnership, chemistry, and passion put on display, weaving around each other, hips to hips parallel, stepping in and out

of their space in tandem, both knowing exactly which move they were going to make next. Plus, living through several genres of dance, holidays in South America, and a madre monte who ran the greenhouse downtown made sure one learned some proper rhythm.

"Pero escucho corridos que juega tomando Tecate,"

"Ya dimelo antes,"

Chan spun Minho around and drew his partner to him, back to chest, dance crowd crowing as the back of his hands skimmed down curves of torso, waist, as Minho angled Chan's face to meet his over his shoulder and grasped his right hand with his, both grinning and knowing of all the eyes on them and not giving a damn.

"Ya si quieres dinero,"

"Lo siento, no tengo,"

With those joined hands, they whirled apart and around and back into their loop, where the dance flared up and set off to the synchronic boom of their feet hitting the ground.

"She takes my dinero, take my dinero,"

The bar crowd cheered around them, making room for the maelstrom while their coven just watched, smiling at what they'd seen a million times before. With every move on beat, every excuse they took to glide closer to the vicinity of the other's hands, every twist and fluted step and pivot, it showed just what they were capable of when they were together. They danced like they were making a reputation.

"She's playing hella hard, playing for pesos,"

They spun like twin whirlwinds, just trying to collide, until Minho found Chan's hand, pivoted and pulled him into his embrace, dipped him low into the first verse.

"Why does anyone else even try?" Felix asked, watching them. It felt more existential than anything else. "Why do we even try?"

"We could legit drive off in the car right now and they wouldn't even notice," Hyunjin ruminated.

"You'd get pulled over."

"Eh, still." He chewed his lip, mulling the possibilities, when a lightbulb switched on with the twitch of a smile. "But why let them have all the fun?"

"What're you thinking now?"

Hyunjin pointed at them. "You. Me. Dance floor. *Now.*"

Felix laughed. "Jin, come on- "

" - exactly, *come on*, dance with me!" Hyunjin had already grabbed his hand, roping him along. "We're not gonna enjoy anything just standing on the wall- that's common knowledge anywhere."

"You'll take any excuse to kick someone and call it an accident, won't you?"

"What I'll take is any excuse to *move*- we've been cooped up in the same seats for over a day and a half, and I'm ready to let loose. I know you are too."

Felix rolled his eyes, snickering. They passed by Changbin, who'd taken to watching the performance by an empty barstool. He held out a hand to him, and Changbin choked on a forced-out laugh.

"Nope, you go ahead."

Felix glanced at the siren, who shrugged, pulling him heartily onto the floor near Chan and Minho. Hyunjin kicked them off- movements sharp as the flick of a blade, urging Felix to respond. When he did, his own moves at first were measured, getting a feel for the tempo,

picking up with it until they were executed in time with Hyunjin's, fierce and upbeat and brilliant in the confidence he exuded.

"Yeah, you got it!" Hyunjin encouraged. They kicked back, right, pivoted left, buoyed by the same wavelength of dynamic energy. MinChan cheered them on, still in their own cluster of admirers. When Felix laughed, it was as though his freckles were twinkling stars under the light.

Changbin sighed, leaning back against the bar. "You staying, too?"

"Oh, definitely," Jisung replied. He'd grabbed a seat on the table space itself next to him, looking out over the same view. "Can't risk it."

"You can dance, though, can't you?"

"But no one's allowed to see it. What about you, I know *you're* good."

"Yeah, yeah, I am, but I'd only mess him up, y'know?"

"Hm." Jisung leaned forward, pressing his hands on the rim of the bar. "You're afraid of tripping and falling on your face in front of him, aren't you?"

"Nine rings, I'd never come back from it."

"So... here."

"Yeah." Changbin plopped into the empty seat. "Here."

The bartender seemed a little less enthused. "You're both staring in the same direction."

"Uh-huh," BinSung answered automatically.

"But at different people, who I'm guessing you won't just suck it up and talk to."

"Yup."

As someone whose job it was to cater to the bullshit and gloomy dispositions of otherwise insipid creatures, she did what any bartender would have done: set out two matching shots. "Fruit punch, vodka, grenadine, rum, and a splash of Shirley Temple. Call it the Lonelyhearts Special, on the house."

She walked away, leaving the two perplexed monsters to their shots. Obviously, one didn't get a free drink too often for being a simp. But, since it would be a rude thing to turn it down, they toasted to the deities of love, clinked glasses, and drank.

For Seungmin and Jeongin, it was a little more complicated.

"Okay," Seungmin started. "Someone has to go first."

"And that someone's gonna be you," Jeongin told him. "I'm gonna be the one who laughs at how stupid you were."

They had been in a booth staring at the same Coke and vodka mixture for about seven minutes now, debating who should take the first sip.

"Correction, you don't get to laugh," Seungmin retorted. "If I die of alcohol poisoning, you're the one who vision boards my funeral."

"Aw, you trust me that much?"

"You're the only one who knows my theme."

"The pastel cottagecore funeral Snow White was supposed to have before her so-called 'Prince' kissed her corpse and pulled her back to the land of the living," Jeongin recited.

"No more, no less." Before he could convince himself otherwise, Seungmin grabbed the glass. "Alright. I'll do it."

"I'll tell all the woodland creatures I know about your heroic demise."

The werewolf managed to down one whole gulp before setting the glass back down and retching dryly into the empty space to his right. "Oh. Ugh. Why do people do this to their bodies?"

"Maybe to poison their livers so carnivores know it's tainted meat." Jeongin looked perilously close to laughing, but he was certainly making an effort not to. "I bet it's not that bad."

"Okay, then, wild child. You try it."

"I will." True to his word, he picked up the glass and drank- a noticeably smaller sip than Seungmin had. A tremor shuddered through his entire body, sustained with a tightly strung-out smile as Jeongin set the glass back down. "Hm."

Seungmin had plunked the side of his head onto his fist. "What's your verdict?"

"I want to burn my taste buds."

"There it is." He giggled, taking Jeongin's playful shove with ease. "There really isn't much more to do here, is there?"

Jeongin scanned the crowd, scooting a little closer to his side. "I mean, that's kind of what a bar is for. Although most of the patrons dancing look sober."

"I guess it's not all we have to do- a lot of people say that a bar's a good place to study the human psyche."

"Maybe that's what we're doing here." They both scoffed at that. "I kinda like it."

Seungmin glanced at his seat partner. If he'd seen him move nearer, he didn't say a word. "Me too."

As the night went on, the vibe only got more wild, more truly monstrous. The very minute the bikers, truckers, and lost Brad-and-Janets left the premises when the clock ticked ten thirty, and the real

regulars started filtering in. Some didn't even bother disguising themselves- one cynocephaly walked right up to the bartender and asked for a scotch malt. But even the human forms had a strange, dark sort of beauty to them, like they all had something magnificent to hide.

The lights changed into a glowing electric blue for the song, washing the faces of the dancers in its light, as if they were out of this world and underwater at the same time. Seungmin and Jeongin stayed tucked away in their little booth, half-shouting their conversation into each others' ears, while the action on the dance floor raged on, Minho and Chan still taking the lead while Hyunjin and Felix thrived in their own platonic partnership, both having a similar enough amount of stamina and enthusiasm to make it work.

*"Baby, this what you came for,"**

"Lightning strikes every time she moves,"

While they'd both attracted their own share of attention (Hyunjin had been right after all), it wasn't that that caught the siren's eye outside their bubble of euphoria. He nudged Felix's shoulder. "He's been looking at you all night," he shouted, motioning for him to look.

Felix looked. At the bar, Jisung had used his dose of liquid confidence to strike up a friendly conversation with the bartender. But there Changbin was, not even pretending to pay attention anymore, choosing that exact moment to turn and reach his gaze across the room, lock in it.

"And everybody's watching her,"

"But she's looking at you,"

The glow pulsed from its orb, connecting them through a hazy, scintillating galaxy that filled the room with a azure brilliance, sparkling with exploded gemstones- Felix, shot through and lit up with a larimar profile, a star in the center, and Changbin, outlined

with the shadows of sapphire, a meteor on the edge. The beat of the music seemed to thump in time with his heartbeat. Pride and Prejudice could never.

A man stepped into the space Hyunjin and Felix had created- black leather jacket, strong jawed, slender build of a longma. "May I?" he asked, request directed at Hyunjin.

Hyunjin, though noticeably startled, turned his surprise into a budding smile, sparing a nod for Felix. "Go on," he said, turning his attention to his new partner.

Changbin had looked away now, flustered at being caught in the act. He didn't even look up just as Felix made his way off the dance floor and to the empty seat on his right, shook his head; behind the flash of a black undercut was a smile. "Told you you'd be fine without me."

"Why do you say that? You'd have been more than welcome."

"Please, I'd just get in your way." Changbin slipped his eyes to the seat Felix had filled. "You didn't have to go."

"I wanted to." Here, Felix didn't have to yell for his words to be heard. "Plus, Hyunjin looked like he needed the extra room."

"Ah." They snuck a glance at the pair- already in motion, Hyunjin's eyes glittering in the sheen. "Hopefully the guy knows not to mess with him."

"I'm gonna need a drink if I'm going to properly deal with someone," said Felix. Before he could even say his order, Soojin had a glass out in front of him. "Oh. Thank you?"

"French 75," the bartender answered. "It's the vibe I got from you."

He slipped a twenty into her black-eyed Susan* tattooed fingers, toasted, and drank. "So, have you just been here the whole time, Mr. Dark and Brooding with my row of downed shots - "

" - my one shot - "

" - which I use to drown my sorrows."

Changbin hunched slightly over the bar, mouth wired tight. "Well, we all do different things to distract ourselves."

Felix's fingers flinched around his drink, bit the inside of his lower lip so it hurt. Changbin stared listlessly into his downturned glass, elbows balanced on the wood and hands hanging over the edge, trying to recognize his reflection, find a face that he knew. "You never told me if you were okay."

"Neither did you," he responded softly. "Did anyone have to?"

Even with the days gone by, it was still hard for them to open up- they knew enough about each others' pasts, but that was it. *Enough* was enough; it only had to be said once, summarized, a single instant where someone's heart was laid out on the table, opened, examined, and returned. They stuck together for a reason, ran from it for a reason: it wasn't something they ever wanted to go back to. Dreams were regular; nightmares, though dreaded, were just another part. But having it feel so real, not even knowing they'd fallen under a spell, thinking for one horrific, unforgettable moment that it had all come after them- it was something they hadn't yet been able to put into words for each other to hear.

To anyone looking in, they were stained with the colors of cathedral glass joy, shining so bright no one noticed the fissures in the center of the spiral. But, if you had enough patience, and used the right tools, they could still be mended.

"You don't have to, if you're not ready, but..." Felix reached out, past the shotglass, and touched a hand to the crook of his elbow, enough to make Changbin look up. "Do you want to tell me what you saw?"

Changbin glanced at the ring stain starting to form on the wood, at Felix's hand hanging precariously onto him. "It's... it's stupid."

"No, it isn't. It would never be." Felix tightened his grip, tugged his arm closer. "If you tell me, I'll tell you. I promise."

The music faded into another dimension with everything else substantial; bathed in sunset orange, they made two lonely creatures in the hour of midnight, trying to break the wall between them.

*"You steal the air out of my lungs, you make me feel it,"**

"I pray for everything we've lost, buy back the secrets,"

Changbin's cheeks heated softly- even when he tried to duck his head to hide it, he still couldn't look away. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"I swear it on the nuclear douchebag that created me, cursed be His name."

"Your hand forever's all I want, don't take the money,"

"Don't take the money,"

Changbin chuckled: *good enough*. "It was a dance."

"No shit?" Felix took his hand away, rotated himself to face fully left. "Like the ones you went to back in the day?"

"Yeah, except... I dunno, it was bigger, flashier, like it was choreographed, or something, like..." Changbin snapped his fingers, grumbled. "Fuck, I want to make a reference but I can't remember what."

"High School Musical?"

"No, no one was singing."

"Footloose?" Felix tipped back his drink.

"Lighting was different."

"Oh! West Side Story?"

"Yes!" Changbin pointed a finger gun at him. "Exactly like that! God, it was so *weird!* I saw people I used to know, saw you guys- I kept going around, trying to find a way out."

"Really? Back in your glory days, and you didn't spare one second to jam?"

"Hey, I didn't peak in the fifties, you know that." Felix raised a single sardonic brow. "Yes, I was known to twinkle a toe or two-" The angel burst out laughing. "-but that wasn't what I was focused on! Come on, even I can place caution ahead of a roaring good time."

"*Roaring good-* I'm adding that to your list."

"No."

With so many multigenerational roommates, Felix was pretty much obligated to keep tabs on the sayings they'd bring back from their heydays, namely Changbin.

"I could just tell something was wrong, okay?" Changbin insisted as his giggles slowed to a stop. "We all saw that house- it couldn't have held a full gym of people. So I found an exit and went through it. But instead of back out, I..." The words caught in his throat, coated in rust and old scars. Though it scraped out raw, he forced himself to finish the sentence. "I found hell."

Felix froze. "Oh." He brought his chair closer, drink forgotten. "Shit, Bin, I'm so sorry."

"The seraphs, they... I couldn't see them, but I could *hear* them, I *knew* they were there. They kicked the crap out of me, and I saw them, freaking Yeonjun and Wooyoung and." A *purple flare*. "Ryujin."

"That must've hurt."

"Fucking yeah, it did. And then when I woke up, realized it was all a dream, I felt like the biggest dumbass ever."

"But you know you're not, right?" A noncommittal shrug. "How do you think I felt? How do you think *everyone* felt? I thought I'd finally lost my mind."

"Think we all got a lot of living to do before that happens." But still: "Is that really how you felt?"

"You getting what I mean now?" He nudged his arm with his elbow; he'd gotten close enough. "It's not just you."

Changbin didn't budge, but he'd left his upside-down shot to the periphery, lifted his head to get a full view of who was next to him. "So, what was your dream? If you're still willing to tell me."

"Oddly enough, I actually want to get it off of my chest." He gestured to the boards beneath them: *floor is yours*. "It started in a place a lot like this- though, less monster, more fever dream. A lot of alt aesthetic." Softly, Changbin rolled his eyes. "You don't get to hate, West Side. It was kind of awesome at first. Earth, Wind & Fire was playing."

"One more element and we would've had a full Avatar state."

"Quit reading my mind."

"Carry on."

"You guys were grooving there too. One specific thing I remember is that you actually *wanting* to dance with me - "

"Did you organize this entire conversation *just* to say that?"

"I did not, I simply took advantage of the turn that was taken." *Sure, sunshine*, Changbin mouthed. "I was, um, about to, and then." Felix tapped the bar with a finger like a piano key. *F45 on the jukebox*. "Eric appeared."

Changbin's face collapsed. "Fucking *shit*, Felix."

"Yeah. *But* what sucked even more was the place I was dragged to next." With the jazz hands Felix whipped out, Changbin was able to guess. "My trial at the pearly gates- the one I would've had, anyway, lead by Kevin himself. Lot of Bible quotes, Father worship, shame-y shit, y'know, a regular Sunday." The cocktail in front of him was the color of a sun he'd watched fade to a pinprick. "But when I fell, I didn't see anything to catch me."

He knocked back his glass and drank like he'd said nothing at all. Changbin shifted on his stool, slipped a hand under the bar, where Felix's right was hanging limp. He curled his fingers around his, squeezed them gently into his palm until he returned his gaze. "But we were lucky enough to catch you the first time around. Remember?"

"Like I could ever forget." He scoffed, pushing a blonde lock behind his ear. "Damn. That Smeagol-looking dirtbag really got into our heads."

"Oh, yeah. Thankfully, he won't be bothering anyone else." Changbin swung his legs back and forth, a little kid on a swing. "Hey, sunshine?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For listening to me. Maybe... maybe I could take you up on that dancing offer."

That, Felix turned for. "Really?"

"Well, I mean, maybe not *now*, but." His smile split glittering across his face. *Worth it*. "Y'know. Sometime."

"Thank you, Binnie."

"No problem."

Though for them, the world had shrunk down to two, it kept on spinning for everyone else. Mood lighting flashed from color to color until it reached a vivid red, dusting the crowd in a veil of garnet that moved with them.

*"Salen pa' que la vean que le gusta bailar,"**

"Se pierden en ritmo y comienzan a olvidar,"

"No estan buscando na' 'tan bien asi como estan,"

"Que no le hablen de amor que eso con ella no va,"

Midway through pouring the twenty-fourth straight whiskey of the night, Soojin said, "Hey, spriggan?"

"Hm?"

"That redheaded siren on the floor- he's yours, right?"

"U-Uh. Well." Throat was cleared. "Not- not *really*, but I- that'd be nice."

"If that's the case, you might wanna let him know."

She jerked her chin at the dance. In the fluctuating shift of bodies, the back of a leather attempted to bracket a smoothly dodging Hyunjin into one of the booths, hands grazing wrists and being snatched away. Hyunjin himself was managing a thin smile, but his eyes had glaciated into ice, promising cold, bloody murder.

Jisung slid off the bar, pawed inside his pockets and threw out his night's pay. "Keep the change," he murmured, taking off.

"Dude, this is your whole wallet!"

"Keep it!"

Whether to get Hyunjin out of that longma's reach or to keep the longma himself from getting beaten to a bloody pulp, the motive was unclear, but it was plenty of fuel for Jisung to cross the floor, wrench back his shoulder. "Hands to yourself, bucko." In one bramble-knuckled punch, the guy was out cold on the cushions of a booth before the next lyric.

Hyunjin eyed his former partner, then Jisung. "I had him, you know."

"Did you?"

"You handle things your way, I handle them mine."

"Sorry, would it *literally* kill you to say thank you?"

"It wouldn't! I was just saying - "

"Fucking forgive me for *worrying* - "

"Just look up, dumbass."

Through the haze, the ceiling pipes were faintly blue. A consistent trickle dripped drop by slow drop from a barely loose hinge; the longma had been only a few steps away. "Huh."

"Crappy roadside irrigation systems- my best friend." Hyunjin dropped his gaze back to Jisung. "Still, you... didn't have to do that."

Jisung snuck a look at the longma, scuffing the heel of his boot on the floor. "Well, someone had to at least step in."

"Thank you."

"What was that? Music's kinda loud, there's a lot of people here, I didn't - "

"*You know what I said.*"

"Yeah, yeah." Back at the bar, Changbin, Felix, and Soojin had continued their conversation without them. "So, uh, over there, we were talking about how Regency classics are only good when they're picked up by Shonda Rhymes and recreated. You could join in if you want."

Felix waved at them excitedly with his whole arm. Smiling, Hyunjin waved back. "Tempting, but I'm good. Might just fly solo for a bit, hopefully without dealing with anyone like *him* for a while."

He tucked the longma's foot under the booth table with his toe. The dismissal was hanging in the air, waiting to be called into sound. Jisung was supposed to say it, but he was already looking into the other path, the braver one, the one that meant inhaling the bullet and stopping the siren in his tracks and possibly risking it all with:

"I could dance with you."

Hyunjin froze before he could walk away, looked at a somewhat fidgety Jisung with fresh eyes. "You would?"

"Yeah. Just to, y'know, keep any other potential creeps away."

The little pocket of space the dance floor hand allowed them was too small. Neither of them was moving an inch.

Hyunjin straightened up, faced him in full. "Okay."

"Really? You- you don't have to if you don't -"

"*Jisung*." He took his hand. "Come on."

Hyunjin lead him onto the floor- the song had changed yet again, wistful Spanish guitar under synthesized chords. Magenta hued radiation shone over them as hands were guided to waist and shoulder, held up, bodies drawn closer. Minho pivoted Chan to the side so they could catch a glimpse. Felix smacked Changbin's

shoulder and he choked on his '75. Jeongin was frantically shaking Seungmin's shoulders.

"Enemies to lovers, enemies to lovers, enemies to lovers - "

"Shut *up!*"

Jisung's eyes pinballed over their position. "I've never done this before."

"Just follow my lead," Hyunjin promised, steadying his gaze with his own.

"I love it when you call me señorita,"

"I wish I could pretend I didn't need ya,"

The bachata on it's on should have been simple enough- just cross-step, side, and back. But Hyunjin had a little more planned - feather step, double reverse spin, a thing that involved Jisung being spun out like a fucking Beyblade and reeled back into his ready hold. One was much more slippery than the other.

"But every touch is ooh, la-la-la, it's true, la-la-la,"

"Oh, I should be running, oh, you keep me coming for you,"

"My foot," Hyunjin winced.

"Sorry," Jisung whispered. "You can still throw me out- it's the first verse."

"I'm not gonna do *that*."

"Just because I told you so?"

"Because I know you're good." His smirk curved a dark stroke. "But, now that you say it, that too."

They turned out, and landed in a variation of dosado where one hand landed on the other partner's hip and the other covered it and moved them in a uniform carousel motion.

"Sapphire moonlight-" "You really think so?"

Pivot, change direction. "I wouldn't say it if I didn't." *"-We danced for hours in the same tequila sunrise,"*

Jisung was spun facing out, reflecting in front of Hyunjin, who dictated their pattern. *"Her body fit right in my hands, la-la-la,"* "You never were one to spare my confidence."

"I guess." Hyunjin whirled him around. His eyes were clearwater crystal, open to dive into. "But maybe that's something I want to change."

"It felt like ooh, la-la-la, yeah,"

It was as if they were under compulsion, like they'd moved so well this close a hundred times before, the knee-jerk way one stepped back when the other stepped forward. Jisung followed willingly without resistance, hanging on to the words and how true they sounded.

On the second twirl, Jisung switched up the position of their hands. "My turn."

And as stunned as Hyunjin was, he didn't complain.

Jisung took the lead, moving through the same steps. The routine didn't go without some necessary notes from Hyunjin, but for once they laughed more than they fought, ChangLix roaring cheers and Jeongin filming while Seungmin appeared to be eating his own fist and even Minho swirling by them, passing a wink at which Hyunjin flipped the bird. Even the Beyblade maneuver wasn't so bad when it was Hyunjin gracefully spinning hand to hand, a beaming vision

wreathed in scarlet, perfectly fine at being pulled back into Jisung's trajectory.

"Oh, I should be running, oh, you keep me coming for you,"

Verse two, and a new contender edged into their little zone- an ivy green trenti who offered their hand to Jisung. In response for both of them, Hyunjin pierced them with a glare, hooked his ankle around Jisung's leg, reeling him in just enough for the monster to back off, palms up in surrender.

"You say we're just friends,"

"But friends don't know the way you taste, la-la-la,"

Jisung raised an eyebrow. "Care to explain?"

"Well-" Hyunjin started, stammered, coolly stopped. "It's the second verse. Don't want to find another partner."

"Uh-huh."

"Shut up."

The turnout was effortless, flowing into *"Oh, when your lips undress me,"* each step and change designed to keep their challenging eyes on each other in, *"Hooked on your tongue,"* all the way to the reflection of, *"Oh, love, your kiss is deadly,"* that was broken in a push-and-pull current that rippled from partner to partner telling each other, *"Don't stop."*

They whirled apart and flew back into position in time for:

"I love it when you call me se ñorita,"

"I wish I could pretend I didn't need ya,"

"But every touch is ooh, la-la-la, it's true, la-la-la,"

Through the fanbase that had formed, Jisung could spot Chan's grin miles away.

"I love it when you call me señorita,"

"I wish it wasn't so damn hard to leave ya,"

"But every touch is ooh, la-la-la, it's true, la-la-la,"

He pulled Hyunjin in for the final Beyblade, tornado-spinning freely to the left- too far. When he reached out to catch Jisung's hand, his fingers fell through air, and he careened backwards.

"Oh - "

"Shit - "

Without a first or second thought, Jisung lunged and yanked him into an accidental finale dip.

"All along, I've been coming for you,"

They were so close- too close, they knew that. Barely balanced on a bent knee, Jisung's hand pressed into the siren's waist and shoulder blade like he was trying to stamp his fingerprints through his clothes; stock-still in a 45 degree angle, Hyunjin's had draped around a shoulder, curled around an elbow, gentle as he had never dared to be before. Both breathing hard, light sheen of sweat over their skin, Jisung glanced down once- *once* - and right back up, swallowing dryly. Hyunjin tracked the bob of his Adam's apple up his throat and past his lips, where they met again: one pair green as a rainforest that had existed years ago, the other blue as the Caribbean and Atlantic finally colliding.

"And I hope it meant something to you,"

It wasn't that they hadn't been this close before, they realized. It was that they *had*- and it was still the same.

"Call my name, I'll be coming for you,"

I know that look, they thought; Jisung with astonishment, Hyunjin with panic.

"Coming for you, coming for you,"

The outro picked up, bringing them back. Jisung pushed up, brought Hyunjin back to his feet; neither could afford to look at their coven's hanging jaws.

"Oh, she loves it when I call her,"

Their moves were quiet, cautious, putting as much space between each other as they could without breaking their stare.

"For ya,"

It was just one dance, one slip. It couldn't mean anything; they could look away.

"Oh, I should be running, oh, you keep me coming for ya,"

But *how?*

Seungmin and Jeongin crashed out of the exit cackling.

"Holy shit I can't believe that happened," Seungmin managed in one breath before he cracked up again.

"They were dancing and then he just- and *they* just-" Jeongin broke off wheezing.

"*God*. I mean- we knew they could dance, but *everyone* saw that. Right? I saw, you saw, we're not crazy."

"The midwife of the fairies could have poisoned our drink."

"The drink we only had one sip of." The werewolf did a double take. "Are you talking about Shakespeare?"

"Bartender was always how I imagined Queen Mab looking. There's a reason they call gay people fairies."

"Guess that's true." The exit was a moonlit forest, a straight path to the woods. "Man. Imagine dancing like that."

"Imagine," Jeongin hummed, making like he was walking a tightrope.

"Imagine *dancing*."

"You say that like it's impossible." The gumiho innocently cocked his head. "We could."

Seungmin looked his way, laughing stiffly. "Dance? To what music?"

"The music of the night," Jeongin announced majestically, splaying his arms out towards the world. When Seungmin still didn't move, he held out his hand. "Come on. I won't let you fall."

The breeze blew, rustling leaves and loose pebbles, egging him on. For an instant, it did sound like music.

Then the knife whistled past his ear, and that fucked the moment pretty quick.

Jeongin jumped a foot and a half in the air. "*Fuck!*" Seungmin yelped, pulled him behind him on instinct.

Out of the shadows of the trees, they emerged: eight night soldiers dressed in leather, lithe and sinewy, eerily beautiful in that annoyingly inhuman way with their pointy ears and antagonistically chiseled features, etched in all fifty shades of gray as if they'd stepped off the cover of a noir 80's high fantasy novel.

"Stay where you are," their leader- a silver mulleted Capital-A Asshole -ordered in a thick Icelandic accent. "Comply, and we will

make your deaths fast."

"I hate him," Jeongin informed Seungmin under his breath. "You paid attention to learning the book- what are they?"

"Dökkálfar- Norse dark elves that reside mostly underground. Stone-cold, pretentious, and apparently all of them look like Dungeons & Dragons rogues."

"We hear you mock us," a girl with a wicked Dutch braid hissed. Her knives glinted in her hands, long as her forearms. "For that, we will show no mercy."

Jeongin rolled his eyes to the unforgiving moon above. "*Damn* it, Zico."

"*Oi.*"

Chan stood in the open door of the exit, stoic with the expression of a parent whose child had been sent to the principle's office for the last goddamn time. "We got a problem here?"

One of the elves, a small one with shorter hair, whispered in Mullet Leader's ear. "We work solely in the business of lives, vampire. Once we reap yours, we will leave this pathetic establishment."

Chan scoffed. "Look, Legolas-"

"Sorgarstrákur."

Blink. "Legolas." He stepped out of the exit between SeungIn. "That won't be happening."

As if God had taken a clapboard and yelled, '*action*,' they all came filing out: Felix after Changbin, Hyunjin and Jisung, Minho coming out last. They faced off against each other, two cavalries on opposing sides, neither out to lose.

"Well, hell," Minho sighed; his knuckles sparked when he cracked them. *"Gerum petta."*

The fight started before Soojin even shut the door.

Now, with an unruly brawl such as this, there were no elements such as slow motion to catch all the good bits. Real fighting was messy, brutal, all over the place, especially if you knew how to do it. But, if you were a clan of murder elves versus a pack of trigger-happy monsters and you were trying your best to remember how it went, then it happened something like:

Chan jumping from the shadows of trees to the overhang of the roof to the silhouette left by Mullet Leader like a corrupt Peter Pan, striking out with every opening he got, ducking for white fox Jeongin to use his back as a launching pad over the field, bulleting and burrowing through, sweeping their adversaries off their feet. Hyunjin and a volley of creek water lashing out to the tune of *"I'm crazy but you like that, I'll bite back, daisies on your nightstand..."** while Felix moved to its rhythm against the girl with the knives, pivoting to meet her attacks and cutting with a blinding slash of his own. The informant bursting out of the forest with Jisung on their heels with a barrage of sweet pea vines as their ally tried to back Changbin into a nearby tree with jab after threatening jab of his blade, rearing back and getting what was supposed to be a killing stab stuck in the bark after being fooled by a feint right.

The demon followed it up with a stygian cross that sent him staggering back- even farther as he used the upper hand to press on, out of the corner he'd been backed into. Grabbing his arm in an attempted thrust, Changbin knocked the other knife out of his opponents hand. "Hey, Seungmin!" Across the way, the werewolf boy perked up from the face he'd rammed into the ground. "Go long!" A flying judo flip threw the elf Wilhelm screaming into the waiting pair of claws that ran and reached up like he was catching a football and taking it down to home.

When the last body hit the ground, groaning and just almost defeated, Minhó swept in to finish them off. Mullet Leader's steel gray eyes flared with alarm, pushing to his feet. "Our master-

"Forget them." Minhó spread out his hands. "I'm about to introduce you to a new one."

"Close your eyes," Chan advised the boys, smiling as the djinn's hands began to glow.

Before eyelids fluttered shut, they were able to catch a glimpse of the Orion constellation glaring to life, a shower of stars hurtling in eight iridescent streaks at the shellshocked dökkálfar, Minhó kneeling with his hands on the dirt, before all of it burst into blazing white.

One charred plot of razed ground later, and they were helping Minhó back to his feet, dusting the blackened dirt off his clothes, laughing their way back to the car.

Even for a night, it was nice to win one.

Finesse - Bruno Mars

*Fistfight - The Ballroom Thieves (probably didn't have to add this but yk)

*Dinero - Trinidad Cardona

*This Is What You Came For - Calvin Harris, Rihanna

*Don't Take The Money - Bleachers

*Buscando Amor - Selena Gomez

*Señorita - Shawn Mendes, Camilla Cabello

*Daisy - Ashnikko

*Black-eyed Susan: Encouragement.

Interlude - 2 years apart

Chapter 8: Interlude - 2 years apart

A day in the life back home in Eldritch- with an extra plot twist.

It would be hard to stay with me,

2 years apart,

Baby just 2 ...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eldritch, Oregon - 1 year ago

Imagine living with eight of the strangest people you could have never seen yourself even existing with. Imagine you all come close enough to learn about each other and even get along. Imagine that all those bastards become your family, the home you never knew could take the form of flesh, blood, and bone.

Now imagine that nobody (including you) has any idea what the fuck they're doing.

There wasn't one day where anyone could wake up to Morning Mood* and the sweet little chittering of the surrounding nature with a perfect plan for their afternoons. It was like there was always a rat running around in the kitchen to start them off- especially when Felix yelled, with all the loudness in his voice, "There's a rat in the kitchen!" Because not even breakfast was safe.

"Fuck this." Instead of resolving the conflict, Changbin dipped backwards off the counter.

Seungmin, much more a man of action, grabbed a skillet off the stove. "Kill it!"

Jisung, however, was in a rather musical mood. "*Seven foot frame-*"

" - *rats along his back,*" Felix joined.

The skillet was aimed at them. "Do you want to get slapped too?"

Jeongin giggled, filming the whole thing from a safe distance. "I love it here."

Minho, for the purpose of the vlog, stood by like a reporter, talking into a toaster strudel. "We are out here today, to witness the true reality of what life in a coven is like."

Still on the ground, Changbin pointed at the strudel. "Don't those give you cancer?"

"Not if you can't die."

Chan, acting the mediator, bravely stepped between JiSeung. "Seungmin, come on, don't hit your brother-"

"*My brother?!"*

"Fuck- sorry, it slipped out-"

Hyunjin, holding Kkami to his chest to save him from the dangers of rabies, managed to point out the most important thing. "Guys, it's getting into the rice krispies!"

All screamed. Jeongin laughed.

- which gave a clean segway into the afternoon UNO match.

Changbin threw down his deck, bested by Hyunjin's plus four. "Dishonor. Dishonor. Dishonor on this *whole* fucking coven." He

snapped at Seungmin. "Make a list for me."

"Fuck no," Seungmin sniped.

"Dishonor on *you*, dishonor on your *dog* - "

"What did Kkami do?" Hyunjin argued.

The rant would've kept on going had it not been interrupted by the ring of the doorbell.

"Screw your list." Seungmin pushed his chair out. "I'll get the door. Don't start the next game without me."

"You just *had* to pick red for the Wild card," Changbin grumbled.

"It's not *my* fault you didn't have anything," Hyunjin countered. "In your entire deck, you didn't have anything to save you?"

"And it was all yellow," Jeongin hummed to the tune of Coldplay, giggling through a smack to the head.

"Hey, Chan?" Seungmin called.

"Yeah?"

"Your blood shipments come *without* the body, right?"

"Uh." Chan's brow furrowed. "That's kinda the whole point, yeah."

"Okay." Beat. "Then what the fuck is a baby doing on our doorstep?"

"*What?*"

"This'd better be good," Minho muttered, slapping his deck on the table to follow the rest of the coven to the door.

Flash to five minutes later, and the baby was on the main room coffee table, lying in a bed of silk wool blankets threaded with gold

on a wicker harvest basket, sleeping soundly in a circle of monsters who didn't have the first clue how to deal with it.

Jisung, studying the tiny human lump, made a vague *boi* gesture. "What do we do with this."

"I'm pretty sure we're still trying to figure out *why* this is here, Sung," Seungmin told him.

"Maybe the export fucked up," Chan considered. "I mean, they know I'm not gonna drain a fucking *baby*, right?"

"Maybe it's a joke?" Hyunjin suggested. "A bad one, at that, but it could be."

"Do we really know anyone who would send us a baby as a *joke*?" Felix pondered.

"Might have to think about that."

"Well, we can't just dump it back out," Minho vouched, somewhat begrudgingly. "It's still a living thing."

"But are we really the best candidates for the job?" Seungmin asked. "I mean, we're not even people, and that's what I'm guessing this thing is."

"Jisung, what about that hospice you're starting up?" Chan prompted. "You know how to care for other creatures."

"It's more of an animal specialty," Jisung corrected. "Sure, humans are a *kind* of mammal, but it's a whole different thing."

"Chan, Changbin, you guys were human once!" Jeongin recalled. "Don't you know something about this kind of stuff?"

"Chan and I were only human for maybe a quarter of our lives," Changbin pointed out. "And we were babies for even less. I can't even remember being so small."

"You sure?" Hyunjin taunted.

Just as he was about to get back at him for that, the baby yawned, and the whole room flinched.

"Minho is right," Felix amended. "The baby's a living thing- we can't just leave it out for the coyotes, regardless of what it is."

"I was literally born a fox that popped into a skin suit when I hit sixteen months," said Jeongin. "Pretty sure that thing's a human."

"But it might also belong to someone else," Seungmin offered up. "You know how mortals get when someone else messes with one of their own."

"Don't they leave their babies behind when someone else touches them?"

"You might be thinking of birds."

"It's still so tiny, and... " Hyunjin windmilled his hand, looking for a word. "*Malleable*. We couldn't do that."

"You really couldn't find a better word other than malleable?" asked Chan.

"It looks like the fucking Pillsbury Doughboy- what *e*lse would I say?"

Minho rolled his eyes, pushed off his recliner to his feet. "Fuck. Alright. This is what we'll do. Three months at most we keep the thing- *three months*, and that's it." The coven groaned. "Come on, it's that, the woods, or that orphanage out Southeast. We don't even know what *that* place is like, and I'm gonna go ahead and assume it's shit. It might just be a little doughball right now, but it doesn't deserve to grow up in a place that could be bad for it."

"And if it does belong to someone, we put up an ad, send out flyers," Chan suggested. "I mean, it's a baby- no one could possibly leave one out for too long."

"Don't sound too hopeful," grumbled Changbin.

"Are we just gonna sit here and pretend we had anything better planned?" Jisung asked the room, which reluctantly held silent. "It's the least we can do."

That was how day one of baby managing began.

And what better place to shop for any infant-tending needs than Eldritch's own antique store, Merry And The Witch's Flower.

"Minho, really, I'm very... flattered, that you chose my store for your shopping," Yerin managed, black hair spilling over her back as she craned her neck to scan the medieval bassinet piled high with 1800s toddler clothes, books, and toys that he'd set on the counter. "But don't you think you should be going somewhere more suited for this kind of thing?"

"Oh, Yerin, you know I don't trust anyone else to shop anywhere other than here." Minho shifted his purchase to the side so he could see her. "Besides, Chan's already at the grocery store to get any other essentials."

Jamie emerged messily from the backrooms; today, her lilac hair was loose, held back with a lime green bandanna. "What's this?" She swept behind the counter next to her girlfriend, bumping a row of herb jars that Yerin set back into place with the flick of a wrist and a timely gust of wind- it was a sylph thing. "Are you getting another cat?" Jamie gasped. "Are you and Chan going to adopt?"

Minho laughed. "James, have you *met* us? Chan keeps himself busy with the boys- / haven't cared for anything mortal since I was in a lamp. Sorry to disappoint, but not happening."

Yerin quirked a quiet smile. "Isn't that kind of what's happening?"

That triggered an even louder gasp. "Details, Min, *details!*"

He rolled his eyes. "By some kind of backwards miracle, we have come into the possession of a living, breathing, human child- little shit was left on our doorstep by some even bigger asshole. Because there's nothing on it to suggest it actually belongs to anyone who cares, and we don't want to trust it with anything that could possibly treat it any worse, the coven has elected to take it in for three months, or at least until someone claims it."

"You keep calling the child it," Yerin noted. "Have you not even come up with a name?"

"Nope- because that means we get attached." Minho raised his index finger. "Names mean we have something to call it, something to remember it by."

"Well, you're going to have to pick one *eventually*," Jamie argued.

"Min, these are for different ages." Yerin held up two buttoned shirts. "You do know how old they are, right?"

"Something like a year, I don't know. I wanted to be prepared for everything- I don't know how fast these things age!"

"Dude, you're dealing with a human, not Twilight- it's gonna take like, two years to fit into these." Jamie clicked together a pair of miniature bowler shoes. "*Wait*, omigod. You should name them Renesmee!"

"*And* I'm out." Minho picked up his mountain. "Wish me luck, ladies."

Yerin smiled after him. "Just the fact that you took the kid in shows you care. You've got a heart in you after all, Minho."

"No heart- just a full head of garlic, beating contempt."

"You're a *saint*!" Jamie called, getting the sylph next to her to crack up. "A jelly bean, a rosebud, a- a little sugar pumpkin!"

"*Garlic!*" Doorslam.

After cleaning room 15 and situating the child in there, the coven convened in the living room for one last meeting pertaining to the child. Under a timeline of three months, a vow of no violence, and most importantly, no getting attached.

"Easy enough," Seungmin decided. "I already spend enough time avoiding humans my own age."

"But Jamie does have a point," Chan interjected. "We are gonna have to call them something."

And thus, after much debate, the mystery child's name was, not-at-all confusing, gender neutral, all-around crowd favorite: Kid.

When asked if it was a proper human name, Changbin simply shrugged. "To the point. Good enough."

The first three days was an awkwardly strung-together collage of every member of Stray Kids having no idea what to do with their hands. Either they were too afraid to touch Kid because that motherfucker didn't even have *kneecaps*, how did they know that if by touching them they might dissolve something else, or because babies were tiny, squishy, heinous little hazards, touch them and the god they served would make them sprout fangs. Then to say nothing of feeding them - "Why can't they just grab the spoon and do it themselves?" Changbin - playtime - "They looked at me like they wanted my face to be the xylophone." Hyunjin - and diaper changing - "I have so much respect for every decent parent on this planet." Jeongin.

But the crying most certainly was something else. Short, bearable bouts in the daytime, usually fixed when someone sat down with them for a few minutes or so. At nighttime, it sounded like an unsavory cross between the ugly wails that the senseless video game MC followed up the rickety stairs and a drag queen's nails raking across a chalkboard. Maybe it was a *bit* of an exaggeration, but it may have been less baseless would Kid actually stop.

From the main room, they could hear it. Chan dropped a pillow over his face, perhaps a lackluster attempt at self-suffocation. *"Somehow, I'd be doing alright, if it wasn't for the nights."**

"If it wasn't for the nights, I think that I would make it," Jisung sang along, face covered by his own jacket.

"I will not kill a child, I will not kill a child, I will not kill a child," Seungmin droned, plucking the petals off a buttercup.*

Felix, on the other hand, rolled his eyes. "You're all horrible." He pushed off the couch and made for the second floor. "I'll go check on them."

"Maybe you could get them to be quiet," murmured Changbin, jolting out the way of a sock to the head. "What'd I say?"

The bassinet was kept in the living room, which had since been baby proofed with hallway gates, safety covers over electrical sockets, and anything with cords moved high out of reach. At this time of night, it was all covered in a sheen of charcoal black, furniture and discarded toys outlined carefully in thin tracing that could only be seen if you looked close enough.

Felix stepped over a Lincoln log replica of what may have been a destroyed cornucopia, followed the wails to their loudest point and sat by it on the coffee table. "Alright, alright, everything's okay, I'm here."

The wails only seemed to get louder. "I'm not gonna hurt you, I promise. Let's see, is something wrong here, or- " Louder. "Nope. 'Kay. Well, we fed you about an hour ago, and literally just changed you, so, what else am I forgetting..." The crying ceased into a smaller, steady stream. "Jeez, it's like looking into a black hole, you can't even see here-"

A black hole.

They couldn't even see.

He glanced out the living room window; what should have been a clear view of the moon was covered with swathes of black smog, only allowing a few slivers of light to fall through, barely enough for a little person whose eyesight wasn't even fully developed. "Are you scared of the dark?" Kid hiccupped. "Is that it?"

Their breath hitched a couple times, shaking around what could have been the word 'yes.' "Okay. Okay, don't worry, I got you." While shaping his hands into a sphere, he felt a tiny finger try to grab his pinky. "Oop- not now, hold on." Felix cupped his hands closed, then a spark in his palms, and he opened them around a blazing orb of white light, dimmed so it could be looked at up close. "There. Is that better?" Dark eyes widened with childish wonder, met his over the light. "Hold on- let me make more."

Bulb after tiny bulb floated into the air as a makeshift night sky, softly illuminating the room better than any nightlight. Around twelve, Felix finally stopped to let Kid grasp his finger. "There we go. You just needed to see something, didn't you?" A happy little gurgle bubbled out of their mouth. "It can be a little scary sometimes- just feels like it can all swallow you up. But you're okay. You just need something to remind you."

Kid gazed up at him in guileless marveling, hanging on to every word. "I used to think this was what being an angel was like. Just being able to help people, show them what you could do for them. I always wanted to do that." He puffed a soft sound like a laugh. "'Course, it's not like that, not really, but, y'know. I still got to do it. Just my way. Of course, sometimes you learn that not everyone deserves help, or you don't know how, because all living things are weird like that, but it doesn't mean you can't try. It's the least anybody can do." At a gummy little smile, Felix grinned back. "You're not so bad, are you? Just need time to be understood."

When Kid finally felt safe enough to fall asleep, Felix softly closed the door behind him. "*Jesus-* fuck, what're you guys *doing?*"

"Just taking notes," the entirety of Stray Kids replied, smiling in a huddle that proved they had most definitely heard and seen everything inside of room 15.

"Whatever." As Felix passed them by, they watched him leave, amazed and affectionate.

"Maybe we should pull a page or two out of his book," Seungmin murmured fondly.

From that day forward, they started to treat their inherited parental duties as less of a chore, more of a privilege.

Instead of just keeping Kid to their toys, Jeongin took it upon himself help them on down the stairs- kind of like a service dog, except a hyperactive fox. "When I was around their age, I wanted to swim in a lake infested with fur-bearing trout."

"We don't know how old Kid is," Chan reminded him. "But we are definitely talking more about that."

It was weirdly adorable, Kid in their hideous peacock blue paisley frock and Jeongin's spotless white fur zigzagging this way and that around the inner circle, giggling through a game of hide-and-seek tag. The child didn't seem at all frightened at the fact that they were being chased by a thing that showed sharp teeth when he smiled, talked back to their incessant laughter.

"D'you think they're gonna grow up thinking all animals talk?" Seungmin mused, watching over the catwalk railing.

"Whether or not they find out the hard way," Minho smiled into his coffee mug. "They're sure gonna have some wild memories from here."

Kid toddled behind the couch, where Jeongin was already waiting. "Aha!" He sprang out, and the child startled back, ungainly in the innocent way one was when they couldn't properly move yet. "I win

again, young champion. Try as you might, but you shall never best me."

However, instead of bursting out in tears like they had so many times that week, Kid just kept on laughing, toddling right up to the fox and throwing their arms around his neck, which was enough to shock Jeongin right back into human form.

"You're crazy," he murmured, holding her up like Simba, studying this strange little creature. "You're gonna die one day, and you're just gonna laugh." They didn't seem to know how to do anything else. "Weirdo." Jeongin chuckled, and soon both of them were laughing together.

A possible explanation for this was that the child had no fear; one had to be virtually fearless to enter Minho's sorcery room while he was in it.

Minho didn't even notice at first- he'd been taking inventory of his jarred components the way any rational celestial being would: balancing them on stars floating around him and scrolling through with a checklist. Naturally, Kid was so amazed they dropped the apple slice they'd been gnawing on, and he finally turned around.

"Oh, it's you." He waved a hand, dismissed the jars back to their proper place on the shelves. "How did you find your way up here?" Still gaping, Kid pointed out the open door. "Well, I can see that. Was yours left open?" Nod. "Hmm. I suppose you're enjoying this freedom. Can't say I blame you- it isn't something to take for granted."

He turned around to continue, but the child didn't leave. "What is it? Interested in seeing where the magic happens?" Kid beamed eagerly. "Welp, this is it- not that I really need it. I've got plenty of magic myself, but there's only so much the sun and stars can do for you. Meet a couple of the right lesbians, and you can learn lots." Kid waddled closer, onto the Devil's trap rug completely unharmed. "That

does debunk one theory." Minho frowned. "Alright, alright. You want to see something?"

Kid clapped their hands in anticipation as Minho sank to his haunches. Palm open, the power beneath the skin crackled to life, sparks dancing over the joints of his hand. With a snap of his fingers, they joined together and shot up in a bite-size explosion of sparkler fireworks. Ecstatic, the child broke up into another bout of giggles. "Alright, get out of here. And leave that apple for one of Jisung's mice- the five second rule isn't that strong." Still, he took a second to shake his head before he got back to work. "Amazed by a parlor trick."

They preferred their adventures outside; with Jisung to keep them safe in the fields, there wasn't much that dared to hurt them.

He'd move the roots beneath their feet so the ground would move in little rolling hills, not enough to trip them, but enough to keep them stumbling along, kicking up little blades of grass and chasing ladybugs.

"Don't go too fast, we don't want you to fall," said Jisung, jogging lightly alongside them. "Hey- fuck off." He swatted an incoming hornet with a weed tendril. "The ladybugs are our friends, Kid. They eat the aphids."

The child stopped, struggling around the word. "A- aff - "

"Aphid," Jisung repeated slowly, quieting the earth floor. "They're pesky little dudes who like to eat your plants and flowers. We like to keep our flowers safe, don't we?"

Earnestly, they nodded. "Correct." As a prize, he touched his fingertips to the ground, bringing about a popping burst of meadowflowers around their feet, smiling when they giggled with delight. "Pretty, huh?" Still giggling, Kid plucked a daisy* out of the ground and held it out. "For me?" Instead of a response, they

waddled away, leaving him in the grass to hold the flower gently to his chest. "Little *asshole*."

Yet, even with their supervision, there were moments when they'd still get hurt.

It was Seungmin who ran into the main room kitchen to find them crying on the tile. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, what happened?" He knelt in front of them, trying to assess the damage. "Where does it hurt, is- is it your hand?" Faintly, he could see an angry red splotch on their palm. "Here, let me see." When he reached for their hand, they jerked it away. "Come on, let me-" He stopped himself, began again softer. "I know it hurts. Just let me help you."

Gingerly, he turned over their palm; a tiny welt the size of a bug bite. "Okay. Alright, we can fix this." Not letting go of their hand, he reached into the freezer and pulled out an icepack, then a cupboard full of on-hand first aid supplies. Holding the icepack over their palm, he dug out the aloe vera. "How did this happen?" A sniffing half-hearted point up at the stove, where the skillet handle was hanging off. "You know you're not allowed to touch that- can't even *lift* it all the way." Seungmin grabbed a towel and shoved the skillet farther out of reach. "It isn't your fault- you didn't know what would happen."

Next was the aloe vera. "Minho gets this stuff specially made- Chan has this friend who's kind of an herb specialist. I haven't met her myself, but I've heard she's pretty strong." Wrapping the bandage around their hand, he wiped a tear off their cheek. "There. You're okay now."

But their eyes curiously followed his hand, where his own scars wrought across his palm. "Oh- yeah. Those are old. Years old- I got hurt pretty bad a while back, but I got out of it. They always hurt the most when you first get them, but you never really forget they're there." The child dug a Band-Aid out of the kit, fumbled with the wrapping. "Something wrong? Did you get hurt somewhere else?" He finished unwrapping it for them and handed it back. But instead of showing him another burn, they stuck it over the scar that had

taken the place of his lifeline. "Oh." Their little hand hung onto his thumb, both bandages overlapping. "Oh, hell."

And even moments of leisure were filled with fun.

The main living room area hadn't been completely Kidproofed, so even just sitting there they needed supervision. Thankfully, Chan had had many years of practice dealing with a temperamental bunch of eternal vicenarians and teenagers, so he knew how to make it worthwhile.

With their little bin of sortable shapes, Chan kept their spirits up with shadow-travel hijinks that amounted to apparating into every corner their eyes could see: a hand waving at them under the couch, another handing them a block, then a head under the recliner, out from the shoe closet. Maybe a normal child would've been terrified, but perhaps Kid had already gotten used to this life out of the ordinary.

When Minho walked in, the upper part of Chan's torso had poked out of the shadow of the coffee table like a gopher from a hole. "You look like you're having fun."

Chan looked up from Kid, chuckled sheepishly. "It's kind of exhausting, actually," he admitted. "But I guess that's what it's like with actual kids."

"Never know how people do it." Minho reached down and pulled him out the rest of the way, both of them sitting on the lip of the couch. "Just look at them."

"So weird," Chan murmured. "Maybe this is what life would've been like had I actually stayed human. Remember first hitting twenty-thought I'd have a wife and kid in maybe a year's time." The djinn smirked, arched a brow. "Well, I don't know if they would've cared about the wife part, but I don't think I'd want it any different."

Minho hummed through a smile, gearing up his next piece. "And... maybe it wouldn't be too late for the kid part, either?"

"Huh?"

"I've been thinking. About these past few days, how they've been, and wondering if." He nodded not-so-subtly to Kid. "Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if we *didn't* let them go?"

Chan could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Minho, are you saying you want to... keep them?"

"God, I know. Listen to me, I can't even believe it either." But in spite of the sarcasm, he continued. "Sure, it took us a while to come around, but we're not exactly doing *bad*, are we? Maybe if we get the coven to vote on it, we can come to some kind of agreement."

"Min, we still don't know if this kid has actual parents- no one's answered the ads."

"It's been almost two weeks, Chan- if someone wanted to by now, they probably would've. We might not be the best, but we're better than nothing."

"Are we? We still don't even know if Kid is *human*. If we were to raise a human, that means they'd grow up- out of the form we know and into all the other phases, the ones that *no one* wants. Literally- you hate those ones the most. They'd be surrounded by monsters, wouldn't know what normal is, become something we could never recognize. Plus, I can bet that they'd want a much better name than Kid."

"I *know*," Minho groaned. "I just don't know how I'm gonna have to say goodbye to this little vermin."

"You and me both." Chan draped an arm around his shoulder, watched with him as Kid finally got that star into the right hole. "But until then, we can see what happens."

In the rare times when they could escape from their guardians, it was always for a reason.

How they managed to steal into the forest completely undetected was inconceivable; they must have been curious enough at the jangling thuds made by the punching bag Changbin had tied up to a couple of strong branches to take the risk.

A tug at his pant leg, and Changbin switched focus. "Oh. It's you." Shucking off his gloves, he lowered to his haunches to see the book they'd brought with them. "Pretty cool, but I don't think you can read yet." They held it up to him. "You want *me* to read it? Aw, man, here I was just thinking you wanted to see me." They peered up at him, begging until he gave in. "Alright, alright. Let's just get some better lighting."

Had anyone looked outside into the backyard, they would've seen two figures seated on a log under the light of a sunset, one hulking and one slight, taped hands turning cardboard pages, a cauliflower ear tuning in to listen to a half-formed reply, smiles that gleamed with the same youthful spirit.

The conversation that was actually happening contrasted very much with the image.

"Cow says moo, cat says nothing." Page turn. "Roosters demand for God to finish them off every morning." Another page turn. "Dog says woof, duck says-" Changbin paused to think about that one. "Well, not really 'quack,' more like 'wank' with a pronounced nasal, kinda like mine." Kid seemed to get excited at that. "Oh, yeah, it's there. You just haven't heard me laugh yet." The page was turned. "Pig says you have the right to remain silent, fox doesn't say shit." Kid gasped. "Come on, you were gonna hear it at some point."

"Changbin!" Felix called from the training yard. "Come on, dinner's ready!"

Changbin rose up, dusted off his knees. "Welp, that's something I'll probably never be allowed to do again. Our secret?" They obliged in the offered high-five. "Hell yeah." Then Kid grabbed his hand. "Wait, what're you- oop."

Holding his hand, they tugged him the rest of the way over the field, letting go when Felix stepped aside to let them waddle inside. Felix grinned at the demon, who was staring in somewhat flustered mystification at his hand. "That was adorable."

"Nope. Still hate them."

"Mm-hm."

In the nights, when they did cry, though not as much as before, it wasn't so much of a nuisance anymore.

Hyunjin hopscotched over the toys scattered across the carpets, nudged the past lightbulbs Felix had left suspended in the air to sit on the coffee table beside the basinet. "Alright, alright, you can stop now, I'm here. You realize we can't do this every night, right?" Another sob, just for good measure. "Fine. But just one more."

He closed his eyes and waited until the night had quieted, until Kid was readily listening, and he could hear nothing else. When Hyunjin found the song he was looking for, he opened them, tapping his fingers to the beat on the table, humming the intro of a softly plucked guitar melody, one string at a time.

*"Come a little bit closer,"**

All throughout the motel, even with their doors closed and room 15 only open a crack, they could hear him, reverberating through the walls.

"Hear what I have to say,"

In room 17, Chan unconsciously pulled a sleeping Minho into his arms, only receiving an answer in a snore.

"Just like children sleeping,"

"We could dream this night away,"

Room 5, first floor- Jeongin twitched in his sleep, fox ears occasionally popping up in place of his human ones.

"But there's a full moon rising,"

Just next door to him in room 4, Seungmin gasped awake, just barely having evaded the clutches of another nightmare.

"Let's go dancing in the light,"

Room 21, second floor- Changbin lay awake on his own bed, tapping his knuckles on the headboard to the beat.

"We know where the music's playing,"

"Let's go out and feel the night,"

The floor beneath him, just a room to the left, 14, Felix perched on the edge of the mattress, nodding and swaying along.

"Because I'm still in love with you,"

"I wanna see you dance again,"

"Because I'm still in love with you,"

"On this harvest moon."

In the bassinet, Kid was already dozing off, but Hyunjin wasn't singing for them anymore. When he started a song, he always intended to finish. So focused, he was, so lost in his own realm, that he didn't hear the timid creak of the door to room 12.

"When we were strangers,"

A glittering green eye peeked out of the door's shadow, following the voice up to the second floor.

"I watched you from afar,"

By the entrance, Jisung's fingers grazed the headstock of his guitar, aching to join in.

"When we were lovers,"

"I loved you with all my heart,"

They started to lock around the fretboard, trail him in the graze of a footstep outside until Jisung stopped.

"But now it's getting late,"

"And the moon is climbing high,"

It wasn't that he was scared. He didn't really want to join him, do anything that interrupt him. He just wanted to know, that somewhere, this was happening.

"I want to celebrate,"

"See it shining in your eye,"

Jisung sat down beside it instead, next to his barely open door, listening to the siren's lullaby, humming a harmony that he knew he wouldn't hear.

All throughout the motel, they settled for just hearing him; Minho blinked a drowsy eye open, found Chan's arm around him, and returned the embrace, drifting safely back to sleep. Jeongin soothing enough to be calm in his own skin, still in his dreams. Seungmin lying on his side, ear to the sound, the clutch on his blankets relaxing. Changbin closing his eyes as he echoed the song. Felix

laying back, yawning through a smile. Jisung blooming a red rose from the pads of his fingertips.

"Because I'm still in love with you,"

"I wanna see you dance again,"

"Because I'm still in love with you,"

"On this harvest moon."

Hyunjin finished the song, looked into the bassinet to see that the Kid was long since out. When he reached his own room, 25, and picked up the rose left in front of the door, he couldn't resist a glance over his shoulder at room 12, which had already been shut. Biting a smile into his cheek, he took it inside with him; it was just as good as applause.

Kid walked down the stairs the next morning without anyone's help.

Everyone else woke up by the time they'd reached the ground, toddling somewhat off-kilter with bare feet on the grass, too perplexed to properly understand what was going on.

"They aren't supposed to wake up in another hour," Changbin grouched, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "The hell is this?"

The coven stumbled after them, knocking anything potentially hazardous out of the way before Kid tripped over it. Nothing seemed to deter them; they were like a little baby sea turtle freshly hatched, clumsy and inelegant, but determined.

When Jisung opened the lobby entrance door for them (he didn't know what else to do), they jumped right over the steps and landed on their feet, turning to face the dumbfounded coven one last time.

"Bye-bye," they said with a tiny wave, and turned back onto their course, bumbling on until, right through the back of their frock, sprouted a pair of fluffy gray wings that carried them fluttering into the air until they joined the large, robust shape of another hippogriff in the sky, flopped onto it's back and shot off into the clouds, of course giggling.

A cream-colored envelope drifted down with the feathers; Chan caught it in midair and ripped it open. "To the coven of Stray Kids. Thanks for taking care of my daughter while I was on vacation. She sends her regards. I already picked up all the stuff you guys got for her so we're cool. Ever need anything else- protection, favors, just hit me up. I got your backs. Chen."

"Chen," Seungmin sounded out. "Like the guy who moved his family to the mountains?"

"Yup." Chan folded the letter back up. "Huh."

"Guess they had parents after all," Minho murmured, a little sadly.

"Thank God they weren't human," piped Jisung. "That would've been embarrassing for all of us."

The coven nodded in mournful agreement. A moment was taken to remember all that had happened in the past week.

"Okay, since we're all awake," Jeongin started. "Felix and I found this vegan french toast recipe, so-"

"Oh my God, yes."

"*Fuck* yes."

"Why didn't you just lead with that?"

"Alexa, play Le Festin."

And with that, the door closed on another successful chapter of a day in the life.

2 years apart - Eddy Kim

*Morning Mood - Edvard Grieg, Yuri Temirkanov

*We Don't Talk About Bruno - Encanto - Cast

*If It Wasn't for the Nights - ABBA

*Harvest Moon - Imaginary Future

*Buttercup: Childish behavior, ingratitude, unfaithfulness.

*Daisy: Innocence and purity.

Part 1 - Crash My Car

Chapter 9: Part 1 - Crash My Car

That's right baby officially part 1 in the story we're getting into it now.

Time to get a look at the origins of how our favorite Minho and Chan came to meet + our first Twice cameos!!

TW: brief descriptions of blood, violence, and abuse ahead.

You can crash my car tonight,

Go out wasting all my time and money,

I love the way you're breaking my heart,

And I can't stand to see you leaving lonely...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eldritch, Oregon - 1944

Chan slammed the door of the lobby shut behind him, finally alone. *Let's see, he thought. Odds of getting to the main room without all four of these bags bursting open?* Probably ten seconds.

He didn't need much more encouragement to book it across the courtyard.

First, it had been off to the market for a refresher on household essentials for the motel, that went without question. Maybe it was a little foolish; currently there was no one but him, what with... well, everything going on, but it was always wise to be prepared. No guest

was ever happy when blankets and cleaning supplies were on short notice, thus filling bags one and two.

Then it was off to The Stock Store, a butchery where redcap Wonshik dealt to him right over the counter in a wire bottle carrier with milk bottles filled with red instead of white.

"Anyone looks at you funny, just tell them they're Bloody Mary's," he winked.

"You're so weird."

Weird as he was, he gave Chan half the price for six months worth of blood, which was more than he cut a human on any day of the week. It was like he always said- fellow bloodsuckers had to stick together. It also meant he had to double bag his third load.

And as for the fourth- hey, even the undead could spare time for pleasure. It wasn't like they didn't have the time. In exchange for a visit to Yerin's shop, she let him take a record or four with him for the road, plus a recommendation from Jamie if she was around.

He reached the main room just in time to lay out every single content over the kitchen counter- not a crack or a chip to be heard. And he waited, just so he might hear a response, hear a footstep, hear anything. Of course, there was nothing. There hadn't been for days. *God, I miss her.* Even if it was just the little things.

Settling a record on the platter of the player, the machine crackled to life, and he let Ella Fitzgerald's voice fill the silence. Music always helped alienate the absence of sound, make him feel a little less crazy when there was nothing else around to do so. With nothing else to echo, the song bounced off of the barren walls and shut, empty rooms, settling on the grass like the flowers that winter had not yet let bloom.

*"Imagination is funny,"**

"It makes a cloudy day sunny,"

He emptied out the bags one by one, swaying along to the slow rhythm of the jazz drum, restocking storage rooms 1 and 2, blood in the top shelf of the fridge, records in the bookshelf wall opposite to the couch. From the very beginning, Chan had taken to collecting them- it was a fun way of keeping track of all the changes that the world went through every decade, and every year passed on a new wave like it was nothing. *Nobody even seems to feel it anymore- they just change with it.*

Not like Chan was really one to talk; one lesson he learned quick was how to be a chameleon in a world that never stopped growing up, while still maintaining a streak of individuality. That meant filling his wardrobe with high-waisted trousers, dark-hued flannels, and plain Oxfords because fuck if people couldn't produce a practical kind of shoe for one decade, *one*. And *then* there was all the stuff men were putting in their hair- Brylcreem was probably just candlewax with a label slapped on, which would've been a good explanation as to why it took almost an hour to wash out. The curls needed to *breathe*.

Thankfully, he hadn't woken up with the energy to fully douse them in product, so with the scuffed leather of his shoes, worn fabric of every pair of slacks he owned, and constantly rolled-up sleeves, Chan was your everyday working class lad with God Bless America on his doorstep- although in his case, it was a carved quote from Casablanca hidden beneath a welcome mat.

Just as the record was reaching its third song, Chan remembered records weren't the only thing the sylph gave him from Merry & The Witch's Flower.

Another thing about Yerin: what was a pit stop for a nice chat always ended with her giving him something extra, because in her book a friend never let a friend leave without getting something in return.

"I've already practically stolen all this music," Chan had protested. "I can't take anything more from you."

"Please it won't be any trouble," Yerin said, laughing him off. "Jamie's been trying to get rid of it for three weeks now- keeps saying the energy isn't good for the store."

"But let me guess: no takers?"

"I love her with all my heart, but she's a terrible saleswoman. If not for me, then at least for her."

Reaching into the fourth bag, Chan pulled out the oil lamp. Ornate gold, intricately shaped, nice enough to dust off on the shelf if it didn't work. *Hopefully Jamie's wrong about any major hex*, he prayed. If he was going to expel an evil spirit from his motel, it would definitely be something to do.

The light in his room had dimmed to an annoying light gray, the kind that might have been pleasant had it not covered the sun so completely. Even with what little it offered, he could see the faint layer of grime. Maybe Yerin thought it had looked rustic?

Still, rustic or not, he whipped the cleaning rag out of his pocket - handy to be kept on hand, you never knew when God wanted to spite you in your own home - and started rubbing it off. And either the sun had chosen that very moment to come out, or the lamp really was glowing. Was it supposed to smoke like that? Maybe Jamie had lit a candle inside to purge the bad energy and-

Poof! The lamp shot out of his hands with the knockback of a shotgun and crashed into the pillows with a plume of all-consuming smoke.

A bomb, Chan thought hazily, sprawled against the vanity, coughing up a cloying blend of lavender and sugar. *One of my best friends gave me a bomb.*

As smog began to clear, settle on the ground surface, Chan watched him materialize out of thin air, become solid, right on his bed.

And *oh*.

Sweet mother of the entire, sacrilegious, fucked-up universe.

What the *hell*?

The man lay horizontally across the mattress, his body relaxed, as if he'd been poured fluid out of the lamp as red wine slipped into burnished gold skin with diamond-cut features in a slim whipcord frame, tucked into a dark indigo suit that probably cost more than all twenty acres of Levanter. A half-full bottle of Bacardi was balanced on his hip, hand curled loosely around the neck. Around his wrists were cuffs of pure gold. Head gazing off to the side, his were eyes heavy lidded and merciless, like a cat who'd had his fill of cream. His hair fell in a tame violet swoop; not an ounce of product in sight. Every inch of him was lush and rumpled and opulent, a god of debauchery, a painting that artists had only glimpsed in their dreams but could never capture, filigreed by sweet perfume and magic and traces of unwritten symphonies that made hearts ache all over the world. *With the whole world crumbling, we pick this time to fall in love.** He was the most beautiful man Chan had ever seen.

He was also quite possibly the most hungover.

Blinking blearily, his bloodshot eyes landed on Chan's- onyx galaxies that had witnessed whole kingdoms collapsing, and regarded him as nothing more than a speck. "I see you're just in time for the coronation."

Without any further ceremony, the man drooped over the side of the bed and threw up.

"What the *FU*-"

Ten minutes later, the man was sitting across from him on the kitchen stool, humming cheerfully along to the music, taking in the interior of Chan's apartment. Chan himself was stationed behind the counter, watching his every move.

Somewhere in the middle of Sugar Blues,* the man met his eyes again- coolly, as if he'd just encountered a jumping tick. "If you keep looking at me like that, I'm gonna blast your eyes out of your head."

"What are you doing in my home?"

Suit & Tie chuckled. "Cute accent." He rested his chin on his hand like they were on a date. "Where'd you get it, the land of fair dinkum?"

"I was born in LA," Chan grumbled, keeping a careful distance. "Did Jamie send you?"

"The hell's a Jamie?"

"The girl who gave the lamp to me- the lamp that-" Chan stopped. "Hold on. Is *that* where you came from?"

"Finally, a spot of brain. Pleasant surprise, from someone who dresses like pint-sized lumberjack."

"I do *not* dress like a-" Suit & Tie quirked the corner of his mouth, amused. "Just cut the crap already."

Chan's concerns were dismissed with the flick of a wrist. "Too many questions. I need another drink."

He reached for the Bacardi, and Chan yanked it out of range.

Suit & Tie raised his eyebrows. "From that single action, I can tell we're not going to have a good relationship."

"Boo-hoo." Chan dropped the bottle in the sink without tearing his eyes off him. "Answer me."

"If I do, can I get my liquor back?"

"Are you kidding me? No way!"

"Well, that doesn't give me much incentive, does it?"

"The thing's almost half gone- who knows how long you've been drinking out of it? I'm doing you a bloody favor!"

"Oh, how *mistaken* I am!" Suit & Tie wailed in false theatricality. "You're my hero, I am eternally grateful for all that you've done for me. Is that what'll put you in better spirits?"

"Well, sorry if I'm kind of ticked that the first man on my bed in ages makes the bold decision to spew his guts over it."

"It's called a hangover, sweetheart- you get them after unwinding the laces that keep you so pent up."

"I- enough. *Enough*. Is this a test or something? Irritating me until I actually get it up to do something?"

"Nah. It's just cute to see that little divot in your brow go deeper. Really something." Chan must have looked even more perplexed, because Suit & Tie just rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter what you do- it's not gonna make a difference. I, like several of the other sapsuckers on this miserly planet, haven't given a shit about anything since the 30's, and I'm not about to start again today."

Chan scowled back into the man's blank stare. "So I suppose the least you can do is give me a logical explanation as to how you burst out of a lamp I got from a friend at an antique store."

The man sighed. "I really never thought I'd do this again," Suit & Tie muttered, then clapped his hands, rubbing them together. "Alright, you want to know? Who I am, what I am? How I ended up in your precious little shithole?" He splayed his hands out wide. "You've heard of miracles, right? Meteor showers, lottery millionaires,

successful rocket launches?" A cautious nod. "Well, humans can't do that shit themselves. It's always been us djinns going the extra mile, making it happen for them- the real creators of miracles, if you would." The divot in Chan's brow drove deeper. "Djinn. Y'know- genie in a bottle, all powerful being tied to a hunk of metal, celestial powers?" Chan shook his head. "Jeez. And I thought I lived under a rock."

"When I asked for an explanation, I was thinking something more like a name and brief backstory."

"That's what I'm giving you. Not the ripest berry in the bushel, are we?" He glared. Suit & Tie smiled. "Every once in a blue moon, we're thrown out from the cosmos and into the world, where we're found by some down-on-their-luck bastard who gets a grand total of three wishes completely without limit or price. Well, besides the obvious: I can't be asked to give you more wishes, kill, bring anyone back from the dead, or fall in love. So if you've got an ex that you want to hex, resurrect, or win back, it's out of the question."

"Didn't even cross my mind," Chan promised. "So, I suppose in this case, I'm one of those lucky bastards?"

"At the moment, yes." Suit & Tie studied him. "You're taking this too well. Depressed, insane, or both?"

"Or," Chan crossed his arms. "Maybe I'm not human either."

"'Maybe?' Sounds like something you'd be sure about."

"Come over here and find out for yourself."

Stubborn as he was, Suit & Tie did seem to appreciate the offer of a challenge. Slipping out of his seat, he crossed around the kitchen counter in front of Chan, examining his features with every step closer. When he was close enough to feel the ghost of his breath, hear a heart that should have been beating, make any scandalized onlooker who didn't have a hint of context think they were about to

kiss, Chan smiled: the one that showed his dimples, and- more importantly -his fangs.

"*Jesus!*" The djinn yelped, and Chan broke out laughing. "Fucking *vampire*. Bet that's your only good party trick."

"Smashes every time. *Oh*, you should've seen your face." Suit & Tie rolled his eyes away to the ceiling, probably regretting ever materializing out of that lamp. "So, what happens now?"

"Well, with your intuitive curiosity, we've gone a little over the usual schedule of fifteen minutes, but no matter. It goes like this: you make your wishes, I grant them, and we part ways as unlikely acquaintances."

"Just like that?"

"Uh-huh."

"And I can wish for... anything I want?" Chan considered that, rolling on the balls of his feet. "Huh."

"Yup."

"Well, I..." He hummed, forefinger over his chin, a classical thinking pose. "I don't know."

"Take your time," Suit & Tie echoed, filing his nails on his thumb.

"No, I mean... I don't think I really need any three wishes." Chan shrugged. "There's nothing I want."

The djinn glanced up, eyes bugging out of the stratosphere. Then, like he couldn't do anything else, he started wheezing laughter, almost completely doubled over. "You- you don't want anything, that's- oh, *fuck*, that's rich. Good joke." Through giggles he started straightening up, piecing together Chan's puzzled expression.

"You're joking. You're jo- tell me you're joking. Tell me you're joking right now oh my God you're not joking *what*." He stumbled back

against the fridge, waved Chan away when he moved to help him. "No. No, no, no, no, no. No, no no no no *NO. This-* this cannot be happening. This isn't happening. Take what you just said the fuck back right now."

"Wha- but I-"

"You don't mean it. *Come on.*" He grabbed hold of Chan's shoulders, wild-eyed and frenzied. "Wish for something. *Anything.* A pony."

"What? Fuck no- ponies are terrifying, those things could bite off your head."

"Starting point. Wish for money. A new home."

"I've already got money- *and* a home."

"A new wardrobe."

"I like my own just fine!"

"Then something else!"

"And why do I have to?" Chan shoved him off. "I told you- I don't *need* any of those things. I'm happy with my life the way that it is."

"You can't seriously mean *that.*" The djinn gestured out at the everything around them. "Look at this place! This- this gray *coffin* of a building. Not one guest. You could have it remodeled like that." He snapped his fingers. "Just say the word and you could live like a god. You'd never have to worry about anything again."

"Where's the fun in that? No worries, no problems. I'm already immortal- that would just make it all boring."

Suit & Tie threw his hands up. "You could wish for anything in the whole world- *you* could make it happen. Do you have any idea how many people have killed for this kind of power?"

"Yeah, I do. You think I don't know what's happening right outside my window? *I know*. But I'm not one of them. I don't want the power to change the world- I'm just a guy. Besides- what if I do something wrong? I don't think two chances would be enough to reverse it all if I mess up again. The world's done fine in sorting itself out- I wouldn't know the first thing in meddling with its affairs." The djinn slumped back, scoffed with all the frustration in his body. "Look, I- I'm sorry. But I'm good. Really, so. Maybe... find someone else who actually wants it?"

He sighed hard, pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's not as easy as that."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't just give me away." He pushed back his sleeves to reveal the cuffs Chan had glimpsed before. "I'm tied to the lamp. As well as whoever summons me out of it. So unless you wish for something, we're stuck like this."

"I can't wish you out, or anything?" Another hard sigh. "Shit." They stood on the tile, an undead and a celestial at an impasse. "Well, what would happen to you if I did?"

"Go back in the lamp, pass a couple years, months, decades before I'm found again to repeat this whole shebang with someone else." Suit & Tie cocked a brow. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Nothing, just..." A brief wave of a hand at him. "You don't seem too happy about it."

"And what? You *care* about that?"

"Do you have to be so *aggravating* all the time?"

Suit & Tie smirked. "There's that little divot."

Chan knew his own frigid body temperature enough to know he was blushing, but he'd be damned if he gave a smug, suited-up genie the satisfaction of it. "I'm not taking back what I said." The smirk disappeared. "But maybe we could put this to an advantage that benefits both of us."

"And just what would that be?"

Chan spun on his heel back to his bedroom, returning with the lamp. "I don't want your wishes. You don't want to be thrown into the possession of some random person. We can work with that." He thrust the lamp back at the djinn's hands, who looked at it like it was a baby alligator. "You can live in your lamp and do whatever the fuck you want and I can live my normal life and try to forget you exist. Win-win."

"The fuck- that's it? What're you gonna do, just put me on a shelf?"

"I'll dust you off now and then." Suit & Tie's jaw dropped; Chan had officially offended him in all the thoroughness of the stars. "You can stay as long as you want, leave when you want- go out and take the damn lamp with you for all I care. I'll just be here, living my own life. If ever I want something that stands beyond the grounds of all logic and attainable possibility, I'll let you know. We won't ever even have to talk to each other. Do we have a deal?"

Suit & Tie shut his mouth; objectively speaking, he had a nice jawline. And face. And everything that would've been abhorrently attractive had he not made Chan want to peel out of his own skin.

He snatched up the lamp. "Fine."

"Good."

"40's guys." He pushed off the wall and back down the hall. "Of course they decide to shape up *after* I-"

"Wait."

And on a wingtipped toe he swiveled right back around. "Thank fuck, I knew you wouldn't hold out for long. Alright, spit it out, what's it gonna be?"

"My God, it's not a fucking *wish!*" He rolled his eyes so hard only the whites were visible. "What's your name?"

The djinn paused. For a moment, Chan wondered if he had one. "Minho."

"Okay. Minho. I'm Chan."

Minho stared at the hand he'd extended; either he wanted to blast it off or slice his palm to see if it would bleed. Lamp in hand, he coalesced into smoke and funneled into it, leaving behind only traces of lavender and sugar.

Chan watched it drop to the floor. "Nice to meet you too."

"I can't believe I got pulled back up from the bottom of the ocean just so I could do *this*," Minho grouched- 'this' being hang upside down from his favorite black loveseat next to a bottle of rosé.

"Y'know what I love?" said Momo's voice over the phone. "That I haven't heard from you in six years, and the first thing you talk about is the guy you met."

"He's my master- not a *guy* I met. I didn't have much choice in the matter. And I listened to your whole story before I even said a word! How's the coven going, by the by?"

"Pretty great, even midwar. Now come on, let's hear what Chan did today."

Two weeks- two full weeks since the deal, and neither Chan nor Minho had made a hint of an effort to actually get to know each

other, as per the agreement. Not that either of them said anything about it, or even looked the other in the face long enough.

"Okay, so I told you about the fire alarm, right? The one in room 13 that goes off on every little motion that isn't even smoke and he refuses to replace?"

"Yeah?"

"Dori found her way in, so it went off again."

"Oh *nooooo*."

"Don't even *start*, I'm serious. It's annoying as hell, and I can hear it through the lamp. Dummy went out for another supply run, so I had to turn it off."

"So he wouldn't come home and think he's going to perish in hellfire? That's sweet."

"Please, I'm only doing it because he freaked out the first time it happened- that was even louder than the alarm. I don't actually care about him."

"It's adorable how you believe that."

Meanwhile, at the lobby- the only place with a working telephone - Chan was doing something similar.

"The first person I get in my motel in weeks," he was saying, feet on the desk and rotary base on his lap. "And he's a complete recluse."

"A sign from God you should settle down," Sana replied. "What happened?"

Chan groaned. "He won't stop stealing my records. I keep telling him to stop- they're the good ones, y'know- the 20's ones, the ones I managed to get from the house."

"Maybe you guys have a similar taste? Or he's trying to figure out what you like."

"He refuses to be on the same mortal plane as me- I doubt that's what he's doing."

"Still a possibility."

"Just so I remember," Momo went on, "you appeared in your favorite suit on his bed- "

"-out of pure coincidence," Minho reminded her.

"- out of *fate*. After all the bullshit with Kai, it's a sign."

"So what does that make you, an oracle?"

"Simply a hot genius. Didn't you say you thought his dimples were cute?"

"Then he started yelling at me about how aggravating I was- not a turn-on."

"Well, you do have that tendency. Mark my words: something's gonna happen."

Chan shook his head. "There's no way."

"Let me just recompile the facts for you." Sana cracked her knuckles; God knew how she was holding the phone. "You're a monster, he's a monster. You're immortal, he's immortal. You're hot, and from the number of times I've heard you complain about him, he's *smoking*. So yeah. I say you should take a chance."

"So what if I did?"

"I can hear you coiling the cord around your finger." Pause. The cord untangled. "Come on. You admitted yourself that you thought he was handsome."

"About three seconds before he opened his mouth and threw up over my bed."

"Come *on*. It means something- you know it."

"No," Minho and Chan answered- same time, same determined obstinacy.

"*Why?*" Momo and Sana complained.

"Because he can't stand the sight of me."

"Maybe if you learn more about him, you won't just place all your judgement on a first impression," Sana pointed out.

"We've already got an agreement," said Minho. "I'm not going to change it."

"Min, you can't tell me you're happy in there all alone," said Momo, jabbing a sore point. "You haven't even talked to a real person in almost a decade."

"I'm not alone. I have Soonie, Doongie, and Dori."

"Your familiars don't count. Beings who can talk back to you, form a connection with you- you haven't had that in forever."

"He could be more than just a roommate," SaMo concluded. *"Just try and see what happens."*

Radio silence. A flurry of thoughts that could have stretched out miles. Then:

"Fine."

"Love you~"

"Hate you too." The phone lines went dead.

In reality, it would take a while longer for them to even begin a conversation. The beginning of it wasn't started by Chan or Minho, but a trio of conniving cats.

Chan first discovered them frolicking about the courtyard- he knew they were Minho's by the scent they left behind. After a couple dozen repetitions of his name shouted in the air and shooing grabby claws out of the fabric of the couch, he accepted his new (if not considerably vexatious) furry pals. A few hours of socially-distanced speculation later, he came to find out that his furniture would be left untouched if he exchanged food for peace. Which was how canned sardines and saltines made its way onto the grocery list, into his pantry, and served to the unholyest of trinities as the shittiest tapas plate known to man. Doongie was the first to decide that the vampire was worth trusting, nosing her head into his hand for the gentlest of scratches; the rest of her brethren followed suit when her purrs dictated satisfaction.

There was a bit of confusion on Minho's end, when his cats apparated back into the lamp with full bellies and crumbs on their whiskers. But when he ventured out to the motel, he found himself only a little surprised when he saw Chan setting out a china plate on the courtyard grass, giggling with those stupid cute dimples when the picky creatures rubbed contentedly against his arms and hands as a reward. *If the cats trust him, maybe I can too.*

The theory was put to the test when Chan found another one of his records stolen, groaning with the full expectation that he was going to have to yell at a hunk of metal to give him back his records when a note slipped between a Bessie Smith and Fred Astaire scrawled *WAIT*. At first he thought nothing of it- passing the day downtown, convincing himself he wasn't biding his time, pacing the edge of courtyard as the sun was giving way to dusk -jumping behind a pillar at the sight of a flash of purple making his way into the main room, deciding between two records, and sliding one into the rack. The minute it had gone back upstairs, Chan bolted into the main room

and pulled it out, turning it onto the plate and letting it spin into a slow, jazzy trumpet intro without even looking at the label.

*"Someday, when I'm awfully low,"**

"When the world is cold,"

"I will feel a glow just thinking of you,"

He leaned back against the wall, gnawing on the grudging beginning of a smile to, *"And the way you look tonight."* It wasn't bad taste- at all. *Maybe it wouldn't hurt to talk.*

Which was how, on a whim that *wasn't* stupid (he'd told himself so ten times- it couldn't be) with no idea that it would even work, Chan slipped a paper airplane in through the funnel of the lamp, one that floated down from an spiraling art deco ceiling and into Minho's lap, unfolded to read: *15 minutes. Room 17 balcony. Don't be late.*

As the minutes ticked closer and closer to eight thirty, Chan slouched over the railing in a lengthy exhale, considering chucking Jamie's bottle of moonshine into the slowly setting sun- it was already slipping from his fingers.

But the hesitant click of two-tone Oxfords caught his attention, tilted his head up to see Minho, purple hair swept back, subtle pinstripe suit the color of black cherries, looking like the beginning of a song Chan would write on the back of a check-in form.

Chan pushed off the railing, almost defensively. "I didn't think you'd show."

Lightly, Minho shrugged. "I didn't think you really wanted to see me."

"Who else?"

He nodded acquiescently: *true*. "So, um. Are we... waiting for someone else, or."

"No, no, no." Chan gestured the space beside him. "Uh. Please."

So he did- both of them, elbows over the railing, three feet apart, eyes boring into the grass of the courtyard, unsure of how to proceed. *Just talk to him*, Chan urged himself. *You're great at talking, you talk all the time- you're great at people. You were one, at least seventeen years ago. Just a person who walked and did stuff and opened their mouth to make sound come out of it which is what you should do right-*

"I don't know if anybody's been telling you this, or if you receive feedback at all from whoever the hell stays at this motel," Minhó blurted suddenly, "but the smoke detector in room 13 really needs to be replaced. Or fixed. Or burned in a dumpster fire, because it would serve a better purpose in there than it would anywhere else."

That works too. "Well, I actually have been trying to fix it a couple weeks now, but thanks for the information." The divot in Chan's brow made a comeback. "Wait. How do you know about room 13?"

"You wouldn't know it because you're away so often, but, whenever one of three particular felines decides to go exploring, there's only one being around who knows how to shut it off."

"Oh." Thoughtful brow raise. "Thank-"

"You're welcome." Chan scoffed; it was more laugh than disgust. "You didn't have to do what you did, either. With my cats."

"Eh, it was more so they wouldn't scratch stuff up. And, honestly, they're not bad company."

"When they're treated right, yeah. It's just kind of funny to see them warm up to someone that isn't me." Minhó chuckled. "Especially considering this is the longest we've ever really stuck around a place."

"Least I'm making it worth their while." Chan's gaze raked down to the floor below them, where Frank Sinatra was still crooning from the main room. "And, the record thing-"

"Y'know every decade in the lamp, everything is updated for me? All of it- the furniture, the clothes, the books, the music -all to whatever's considered the height of luxury in the world. I can't hold on to any of it, no matter how good it is, no matter how much I want to. It's just changed before I even get a say." Chan looked up. Minho looked away. "I get the finest of everything, sure. The clothes, I'm not complaining about. But other than Soonie, Doongie, and Dori, nothing stays." He tilted his head to listen to the music. "With your collection, it's. I don't know. Reliable, constant. There."

There it was- a flash of genuity behind that armor of sleek, colorful wool. Chan didn't know what to say to any of it. "There's... there's, uh, *ahem*. An antique store, in town. I know the people who own it- they've got records from basically every year." Because *that* would get him. A fucking antique store.

"Oh, I know. It's just fun to fuck with you. See how mad you get." Chan groaned, flopped his forehead into his hand. "I think I'm starting to get what you meant when you said there's nothing else you want."

"Not stupid after all."

"And, for a lumberjack vampire, you actually have good music taste."

"I was going to say you do too, but now I don't know if you deserve it." A smirk broke out across Minho's beautiful face. Shockingly, he didn't feel like punching it. "Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot."

"Says you. I showed you what was truly inside of me the moment we met, before we even exchanged a word."

Chan didn't even fight it; he laughed. It was a warm sound, like sunbaked earth under bare feet. Minho couldn't help angling himself to hear it. "See, that was a good joke- I didn't even think you had it in you." The djinn turned up his palms: *the more you know*. "How about a new deal- a better one. We start over." Chan lifted the moonshine, sipped, grimaced before he handed it off to Minho. "Jamie made it- I should introduce you guys sometime." Minho tipped the bottle back high. "Oh-"

Minho lurched over the railing and spit it out. "*WHAT THE FUCK-*"

"That's-"

"*Why did you let me do that?*"

"I tried to tell you!"

"You said your friend made this!"

"I didn't say it was good!"

The corner of the djinn's mouth twitched. And then the other. And then both of them. And then he was hunched over the railing again, throwing his whole head into it, lurching back in a childish sway of loud, uncontained laughter, those abysmal eyes crinkled up in glee, his nose wrinkled with them, that impossible violet hair was raked messily out of his face, revealing a splitting, brilliant grin.

And Chan didn't know what to think about that, if thought was necessary at all. Just that he liked the way Minho looked when he smiled- *really* smiled. He laughed with him, moonshine giddy in his chest, the glow of the sunset washing it down.

The thing about deciding not to hate someone was that, in every moment you spent with them, you found another reason to like them.

There shouldn't have been so many. There should've been some reason to hold back, *one* reason to keep your guard up.

But with Minho and Chan, there wasn't. Even with the digs they made at each other, it was easy. Blocking out the bragging of SaMo when the night's conversation ended with 'Maybe he isn't that bad,' they made good on the promise of starting over, little by little. In exchange for Minho returning the records he'd stolen plus a few new ones, Chan personally dismantled the smoke detector in room 13, letting Minho do the honors of destroying it himself with a star out of his palm.

Chan stared in amazement as the machine rocketed away into the sky. "That's what you can do?"

"Plus a little extra. Just wait a day- it's gonna land in someone's house and they'll think it's a piece of alien tech."

"You're a devil."

"You don't even know the half of it."

A satchel was Chan's first gift to Minho- whenever he wanted to go out, he could take his lamp with him 'in case he found a better place to stay.' Once Chan found out Minho was quite the murder mystery fan, he brought a bin to storage and came back to the main room with an entire library's worth of Agatha Christie, which the djinn immediately took apart, starting in chronological order, accepting the cups of tea and coffee Chan left on his stacks. When he got worried about possibly losing them in the lamp, he received a room key in response- 15 had just gotten a turndown.

"Chanathan's a biscuit," Momo chirped over the phone. "Let him sop you up."

Sleep was still done in the lamp, as well as the occasional nightcap- some things just couldn't be given up. But soon enough the vanity was filled with books and records, the closet with apparel from the

outside world, even beds for Soonie, Doongie, and Dori when they didn't want to leave either. Days went by, and Minho abandoned his meticulous three-pieces for the vivid dress shirts underneath with sleeves that could be rolled up, tapered slacks with suspenders that were more for style purposes than necessity whenever there were problems in the motel that were better solved with magic than mortal tools.

"Still waters, deep dicking," intoned Sana.

The more at home Minho made himself, the more neither him nor Chan could imagine him leaving. But, of course, it wasn't a thing. It couldn't be. No matter how much Sana and Momo teased them. They were business partners (sort of), roommates (in the loosest of definitions), friends. Nothing was going to change that.

Shared late nights had become exceedingly common between them- either one couldn't sleep and the other was too busy thinking to want to, so they found their way into someone's apartment and made the most out of it. Tonight was jjimdak, vegetables, and rice in room 17- Chan in the kitchen, Minho behind the counter, and Soonie, Doongie and Dori taking up the other three stools while the music played on.

"Oh my *God*," Minho groaned, mouth full of chicken.

Chan grinned. "Good?"

"Excellent. Superb, for a guy who can't eat normally. I don't even *have* to eat, but it's still good."

Chan guffawed. "So I've just been doing this for no reason?"

"The results so far have been pleasing. You're like regular little housewife."

"I-" He rolled his eyes. "What the hell. Why not." Above their heads, the kitchen light started to flicker, just as it had for the past six weeks. "For fuck's sake-"

Minho zapped it with a white-hot bolt of energy before he could reach for the toolbox under the sink. "You were saying?"

Chan laughed, still amazed even though he'd seen more. "I should've bought your lamp out of Yerin's years ago."

"If you could've," Minho replied dryly. "I wasn't exactly the most available before she found me."

An opening for the other to press further, ask for more- Chan could catch a glimpse of the scar behind the armor. Minho closed it himself. "Never heard this song in our rotation before."

Chan snapped up at the sound of a clarinet solo, a preverse instrumental filling in for a voice. "Oh. Shit. Uh." He stepped back, right, faltered forward before he remembered the motion of left that carried him out from behind the counter. "Sorry, I- I don't know how this got out here, I-"

"What're you yammering about? I'm not complaining. I think I used to have it as a record in the 20's- always liked it."

Chan paused midstep. "Really?"

"Why do you sound so shocked? Yeah, really." Minho spun around in the stool, notched his elbows on the rim of the counter so he could lean back on them. "It's peaceful- like it was made for a time like this, blue night sky, full moon, smoke clearing out. Sounds like something two high school sweethearts would slow dance to in one of those romance movies you like so much. It's a shame we haven't heard it sooner."

The vampire might as well have frozen to the floor. "You really think all that."

"Could you stop looking at me like I've got three heads? I do, alright? If you don't like it, I'll take it from you." The seat to his right, Soonie

nudged his arm, which Minho grinned and obliged in chin scratches. "It's beautiful."

Chan watched them like they were a pair of comets crashing into his life. He couldn't bring himself to say anything else but, "It's mine."

"If it's that special to you, I'll withdraw my offer."

"No, I-I mean, it's... it's *mine*, I... I made it."

Minho stopped scratching, finally looked up at the quietly shaking wonder on Chan's face. "Shut up." It didn't change. "Shut the front fucking door, are you *serious*?" He nodded, cracked up in helpless puffs of laughter. "What the fuck- get *over* here!"

His laughter grew as he was dragged out of the spot he'd been rooted to and thrust back behind the kitchen counter across from Minho. "It's not that big a deal-"

"Yes, it *is*! I've been living under the same roof as a brilliant composer-slash-motelier, and he hasn't said jack shit about it. You've got some explaining to do, mister."

Chan chuckled sheepishly, directing his words at the table to avoid looking into his eyes. "It was something I'd been trying at for a few years- the big dream, or it used to be. Music was a pretty big thing growing up, and I always had a few ideas of my own in the rafters, some I polished up and putting to work."

"Like this one?" Annoying humble nod. "How'd you come up with it?"

"Dream I had- didn't make sense, still inspirational, you know how it is." Minho nodded: *reasonable, reasonable, now go on*. "Wrote the song based on the scenes and the things it made me feel, plus I knew a few band kids around my neck of the woods, so we got to work on it, annoyed the hell out of our neighbors, and made it into the masterpiece you hear today."

"How? I mean, I don't know much on how humans did their shit, but I'm sure it took a while to get picked up."

"Oh, it did. Almost half a year- but it happened. Pitched it to the right person and..." Pause for dramatic effect. Minho most definitely did not appreciate it. "He pitched it to Glenn Miller."

"Glenn Miller. As in... Glenn Miller and His fucking piece-of-shit Orchestra?" Chewing a smile, Chan ducked even lower, confirming it. "Fuck you. No way."

"Yep. And as you can guess, he liked it."

"That's incredible." Nonchalant shrug. "So... why've you been keeping it away all this time?"

"Well, 'cause... I don't know." There was a bigger opening for more, but it was left alone. "After everything that happened to me, I didn't think it mattered. I didn't think anyone would want to listen."

"Is that it?" Chan nodded, a fragile smile curving across his face. "I'd have loved to hear you."

The look in his dark eyes was unsure, wavering on hopeful. "You would?"

Minho offered a secure smile of his own. "I can't think of anyone who wouldn't."

*"I saw my two blue orchids,"**

"My beautiful blue orchids,"

"Last night, and what a sweet surprise,"

The moment should've soured by now; they were free to stop smiling, look away. But Minho meant every word, and Chan knew that, and now they were starting to imagine where he must've gotten the inspiration for the song he'd never gotten to sing: from a feeling

like wading through a mirage, pillow-soft and rippling and fantastical, something just like this.

"Blue orchids only bloom in your eyes."

Less than two minutes later, the bedroom doors to 15 and 17 slammed shut in a panic and phones were grabbed and dialed. *"I'm gonna die."*

"Knew it," SaMo announced. *"You like him."*

"Uggghhhhh."

"We were just talking!" Minho vented. *"We were talking, and- and he made me dinner-"*

"Shut the fuck up, he cooked for you?" Momo cut in. *"Once again, dream guy!"*

Chan was pacing now. *"And the song was playing, and I had no idea until he said something-"*

"Blue Orchids?" Sana interrupted. *"You haven't played that in forever."*

"I did last night, I just- I just wanted to remember what it sounded like, and I guess I forgot to take it out, but that's the thing! He liked it!"

"And I asked him about it," Minho rambled, standing up on the bed. *"And you know how he gets, all- flustered, and giggly, and stupid. It was like he couldn't believe it either. But he was so into it, and then he said some dumb thing like how he didn't think anyone would want to hear him-"*

"And he said that he would." Chan stopped midpace at the quaver in his voice. *"And then- God, he smiled-"*

"Fuck, that smile."

"And then it was like it hit me, like, 'oh, *shit*-'

"- and I took the food with me, even though the cats are eating it instead because I feel like pulling out my sausage link insides and French braiding them-"

"- and I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I did this thing where it was like little pointy pistols- *guns*, with my *hands*."

"Did you panic so hard that you created a new form of expression?" Sana asked, genuinely curious.

"I wanna go back into the lamp," Minho told Momo. "I wanna sink to the bottom of the ocean, and I want to forget I ever saw his sweet, stupid, fucking *life ruining* face and just revel in depression again."

"I *can't* like him!" Chan ranted. "I mean, he's- he's brash, and vain, and self-centered-"

"- and naive, and childish, and dense - "

" - *and that's not how you see him anymore*," SaMo broke them off.

"Minho, *come on*," Momo said, shutting him up. "You've had your dalliances- I've heard you talk about the twenties. You haven't met someone like him in, well- *ever*."

"You might've had a rough start at first," Sana continued. "But he's been helping you out a lot. Believe me, I can tell."

"He's my *master*," Minho pressed. "He's gonna end up wanting something he can't get any other way. They always do."

"One day, he's gonna want to leave," Chan insisted. "I mean- he lived in *luxury* before me. I could never give that to him."

"*And there's still so much we don't know about each other. So much he doesn't know about me.*"

"But that won't change anything now," Sana countered.

"Tomorrow you're gonna wake up and see him and feel it all over again, and you won't be able to do anything about it," Momo went on. "That's one thing magic can't fix."

As much as Minho would hate to admit it, Momo was right about that. Emotions were not a light switch one could easily flip off- that much could be discovered when his own heart tripped over a backflip witnessing morning Chan trudge yawning out of 17 in an undershirt and pajama bottoms, running a hand through his curls in their natural, fluffy regalia. But, if one tried hard enough, they could pretend, which was what he and Chan did, as if everything was normal.

Which lead into the start of week seven. Which was when Minho realized that Chan still hadn't made his first wish.

He'd certainly had the time. And the opportunity- really, the main room oven gas line was just a disaster waiting to happen. And, despite their efforts to deny the fact, it was still the entire reason Minho was there. Yet he refused- shook his head, stuck it out, and did the work himself. Absolutely ridiculous, in Minho's book. Was it another complex that the war forced on the men of this decade? Had some of that hair glue residue sank through his scalp to infect his brain? Or was it just Chan being Chan?

Whatever the case, he'd done so much for him already. A wish was all Minho knew how to give back.

Tuesday afternoon- the cats had gotten to him before he did. Chan was kneeling in the center courtyard, setting out another plate of sardines and crackers for the trio of hungry revenants, grinning as he got cat fur all over his green flannel. Grinning as Minho eyed them on his way down the stairs. *He doesn't even bat an eye anymore.*

"Gotta say, I didn't peg you for a cat person when we first met,"
Minho said, dipping a toe into the pool with small talk.

"I'm more of an everything kind of person," Chan replied as Dori's tail flicked around his wrist, hopefully also referring to his sexuality.
"Found it really helps when a place has no pet restrictions- well, except when a pair of Amish newlyweds bring their goat along for the ride."

What the fuck, thought Minho behind a forced smile. "That must've been something."

"Yeah. It's why room 4 has a piece of the countertop missing."
Chan's eyes glossed over him exactly once as he reached the ground level. "Something's wrong. You haven't insulted my flannel yet."

"Maybe I've finally gotten used to them." It would've been a good answer, had he not told him he looked like the runaway convict they'd read about in the papers just yesterday morning. "Chan?"

He looked at him then, sweet-faced and guileless. "Yeah?"

God, why him? "I'm gonna ask you something, but you have to not get mad."

"Can't wait to hear this."

Minho took in and let out the tiniest of breaths. "Why haven't you wished for anything?"

And-

It only lasted a second, the barest breeze through time. A flinch in the sturdy, graceful set of his shoulders, a twitch in his jaw that vanished under the deflection of a darkly arched brow. "Why're you asking?"

"I figured I should." Minho watched him rise heavily, take the plate with him. "It's not like it's something we can really ignore."

"Well, we don't have to address it, do we?" Chan strode out to the main room, purposely avoiding him. "We've been doing just fine without it."

"By pretending it's not an option." Minho tracked him down, following his path. "Like it or not, but it's still the reason I'm here."

"Does it have to be?"

That's not a choice I get to make. "I mean, I didn't come here just to help fix your motel."

"I know that-"

"-then why haven't you brought it up?"

"Because-" His jaw ticked, stuck out, retracted back in. "Why bring this up now? We've been doing fine."

"We've been acting like we're just two ordinary guys brought together by circumstance." Minho wove around a chair on the way to the kitchen. "That's not true for either of us, is it?"

"Is that all this has been to you?" The plate clattered in the sink. Behind Chan's eyes, there was hurt. "Just *acting*?"

"No. No, of course not." He could have rested his hand over his on the countertop; it would've been easy. "But we can't go on pretending that it's not real."

Chan glanced at Minho's hand, inches from his. "I could've." He brushed stiffly past him back out to the living room. "I was fine with that."

"I know you were." Rashly, Minho followed him out. "But this was going to happen sometime."

"It doesn't have to!"

"Yes, it *does*." The cats retreated the courtyard to give them some room. "I'm a djinn, Chan. It was always going to happen. That's just how it goes- I drop in, stick around a minute or two, you make your wishes, and I'm out. I can't wear out my welcome too long."

Especially with someone like you.

Chan looked at him like he'd been slapped, but seen the hit coming. "Do you want to leave?" His voice was bruised, quiet. "Is that it?" Minho couldn't find a word to say in response. "If it is, you don't have to make an excuse."

"Chan, that's-" His voice lodged in an aching halfway point; it hurt to force out. "That's not what I want."

"Then what is it? 'Cause frankly you're not making a whole shit ton of sense."

"I just want you to know that you *can*. And it doesn't have to be a bad thing!"

But from the look on Chan's face, that's all it could've been. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

Big fucking dope. "What the hell is your deal?"

"I don't have a deal."

"Yes, you do." Chan's eyes flashed in a roll and he started to make for the stairs. "You brush me off every time I try to do something for you, reject every opportunity for a wish just so you can feed into some fucking Superman complex."

"I do *not* have that!"

"The point stands." Knocking a chair out of the way, Minho raced after him. "Is it because of the magic?"

"You know I don't have a problem with that, it's just-" He slowed, trying to shape out his words in a gesture, throwing up his hands. "It's like you said. The only people who ever find your lamp are scatterbrained deadbeats who always end up wishing for crap they don't really need."

"But you could use it for good. I wouldn't say that if I didn't mean it." Resting period over, chase resumed. "Come on, I know you could."

"Enough, Minhó."

"It's like I said before, you could use it to help this place, help others, hell, find whatever it is you're looking for in all those trips downtown."

"And like I told you before, I don't need to." His voice was a quivering tightrope, a tremorous lifeline. "I don't want anything."

"That's how I know you're lying."

They had run themselves to the border of the maze, a dead end in a dim corner- Chan staring down the dark with his back to Minhó, who couldn't give up.

"It doesn't matter if you're human, or vampire, or whatever-the-fuck. *Everybody* wants something. Whether or not they need it, deserve it, or even know if they can have it. Sometimes especially if they know they can't." The djinn dared a step closer. "I can help you if you let me, Chan."

"You can't help me."

"Just tell me what you-"

The crash of his fist breaching through the side of the wall struck sudden as an earthquake.

A shaky breath died in Minhó's throat as he took in the veins pushing against the skin of his milk-pale forearm, a glimpse of strength no living being could have withstood, the crater in the gray walls, dusty

cracks making a crux where Chan's fist had been, now dropping limp at his side.

"What I want, you can't give me," Chan said somberly, hoarsely, like he'd told the same thing to a million different people. "No one can. Alright?"

For the first time, he looked every inch the creature of the night that all the myths and legends traced out, as if the shadows could swallow him whole. "Okay."

But neither of them moved. There were dozens of routes to take; Minho wanted to take the one ahead, step over the caution tape and into the damage he'd left, this time using no magic to patch up the cracks- nothing but what was inside. *I'm-*

"Say it."

"No."

"You disobeyed me. One simple task, and you couldn't do it without fucking it up."

"I'd rather fucking -"

"I wish you would listen to me for once."

A breeze blew. Mist clouded his senses. His hand curled into a fist. "I'm sorry." He cringed at the brush of knuckles against his cheek.

"That's better," Kai murmured. "But I don't accept it."

He caught the brunt of the black diamond full in the mouth.

- Minho's breath hitched, feeling it all over again. He flinched back, let it turn him around, take him across the courtyard and out of Levanter.

Chan didn't need to call a friend to know he'd fucked up.

Anger had never even been an issue in the past, not with anyone. Not with friends who knew all the ways to get to him, and *definitely* not with people who'd only been around a few weeks. Minho had only been trying to help; Chan knew that. He'd been making valid points- he just reached a sore point.

Still, he knew more than half the guests at Levanter ever got to know about him- Chan's own stupid heart had made sure of that. But Minho had been so different; he'd started sticking around, even when he didn't need to, staying for the little things, shaping into more than just the charming stranger who'd appeared on his bed. *And I let myself be selfish enough to think he'd stay.* Perfectly fine with the way things were. Of course he'd needed a reality check in the form of some property damage.

He'd just kept pushing, butting in, wanting to know. What could have made him so curious? Well, maybe the fact that they didn't really know much of anything about each other, for one thing. They'd only traded small bits like bizarre motel guests, or eccentric lamp finders, nothing real about their pasts. *He didn't know any better.* There was so much they didn't know, so much they couldn't afford to risk.

Chan's periphery latched onto a glint of gold, followed it from the courtyard to the lobby coat rack: the satchel, hanging from a hook, Minho's lamp still inside.

Hell. He picked it off, looped it across his chest. *Might as well take one sometime.*

He flipped the sign from *OPEN* to *CLOSED* on the door and took off running into the fog for Eldritch, where Minho was roaming as another one of it's lost ghouls.

Obviously, I can't avoid him forever, he considered. It was definitely an option, but not a good one (thankfully, he knew them well enough from the other walks he'd taken through here). He had so many

valuables back at Levanter- plus there was the issue of not really wanting to, thanks to the curly-haired, flannel-wearing, heart-stealing, dimpled menace who owned it. *The years have really weakened my will.*

Yet with the white smog sliding in from every direction, like the clouds had descended to the earth, there wasn't much more he could concentrate on. *Maybe he really is just one of those upstanding pricks who believes in a real man making his own luck.* No, the idiot cried to Little Women, he wouldn't buy into that. There had to be more to the story, more that Minho hadn't considered. *Maybe it's part of the reason why he was hesitant about showing me the song from before.* It must've been a lot, to make someone like Chan lose his temper.

It might not be something he'll forgive me for.

Minho stopped in his tracks at the thought. Through the phonebox in the ally he'd cut through showed a whole street enveloped in graveyard mist. Would Chan really do that?

No, he was better than that. *Me, perhaps, but not him.* Momo's voice echoed in his head: *After all the bullshit with Kai, it's a sign.* For Minho to move on, move forward. *To stop letting that asshole muck with my life.*

"Minho," a familiar voice behind him chirped. "Long time, no see."

Fuck.

Panic clawed inside of his airway, as if the fog he'd inhaled had converted into blades, but he forced himself to turn around with a cordial smile. "Milo, Keith. It's been a while."

The two men smiled back, both in fedoras and tweed suits, neither faking kindness; on their lapels was the sigil of Lucifer. "You wanted it that way, didn't ya?" asked Milo, perfectly average in drab navy blue. "A little game of hide and seek."

"Kai hasn't been too happy since you've been away," Keith added. He'd chosen to play it safe with olive green.

"How lovely to hear that I've left my mark," Minho replied, notching his chin high. "And I can see you two are still just hunters carrying out his dirty work? Not even rising up the ranks, how *disappointing*."

Keith bristled, but Milo held him back. "He's been on the lookout for you since the storm. Ain't easy to track down a djinn."

"I hope you know now that I've been found, I don't intend to go quietly."

His palms lit up, sparked beneath the skin, fizzled out. Minho looked down- past the fog, the thin inky strokes of a trap sigil painted on the ground, directly beneath his feet. "Oh, damn you."

"He's offered us a reward," Keith grinned. "Still got your old room waiting."

"Then I'll tell you what I told him." Minho gritted his teeth. "I'd rather fucking *die*."

"Good. 'Cause he didn't say dead or alive." A silver knife slid out each of their sleeves into curled palms dripping red. *Lamb's blood*. "He just wants you."

The hunters loomed closer, smiles glinting evilly above their blades, but Minho didn't move. *If they stick me, I'll take it*. Even death was better than going back.

"*Hey!*"

He was already half out of the fog, satchel in hand. Minho's heart rocketed up his throat. "No-"

Wrapping the leather strap twice around his hand, Chan swung the satchel like a chain, catching both hunters in the face. Casting it aside, he lunged, faster than any beating heart would have allowed

him, the force of his blows slicing through the fog, Minho helpless to stop it.

Some movements were so fast he couldn't catch them, slashes and punches and cries of pain that were obscured by thick vapor, but through it he could catch glimpses: Chan catching Keith's elbow in his nose, Milo's knee in his stomach, a knife meant for Minho rearing back to make a landing, but being seized around the wrist before it could. The hand was thrown against the phonebooth, knife falling into the fog with no clatter on the ground. A spray of red, and Keith went down choking, grasping at his throat. Milo glanced at his comrade for only a second and Chan dropped the blade and grabbed a fistful of his hair, cracking it against the brick wall, the sound like a gunshot. As the hunter fell to the floor, the vampire went down after him, his final breath shot through with a gasp as the fangs punctured his neck, a bloody end to any street brawl.

Chan rose up staggering foot to foot, bracing a hand against the wall for support before he slumped against the brick and sank with his back against it, just paces away from Minho's feet, panting hard. With the heel of his shoe, he scratched the paint, breaking the sigil.

"What the hell was that?" Minho whispered.

Chan chuckled, like it pained him. "Missed you a little too much."

Chan could be seen clearly now: sprawled against the wall, like he'd been on the vanity the day they met. His slacks were torn on a knee, the buttons of his flannel were ripped down the front to reveal his now bloodspattered white undershirt. The pallor of his skin seemed accentuated by the fog and the roughness of the color, hair, once tamed with product, now a greasy mess, mouth stained with fresh blood. He didn't look sexy, or anything like people assumed vampires were after feeding. He just looked tired, wounded, ashamed of the way he was being seen.

He reached around on the floor until he found the strap of the satchel, tossed it to Minho. "Get inside. I'll take us back." Inside was

the lamp, untarnished. "I'll be fine." There was no way he could've meant it; he was hardly able to stand.

All his life had been spent in that lamp, the same gold as the cuffs that could never come off his wrists, thinking of it as nothing more than a prison. *And now he's giving it to me as an escape.*

Minho switched focus to the vampire still trying to push off the ground, trying to pull himself together for his sake.

He didn't even feel the lamp drop until he heard the cool metal clatter to the floor as he lowered to his knees, steadied Chan's moves with his own hands on those strong shoulders. He hissed as Minho tipped his chin up to look him in the eye, met them sadly, weakly, as if to apologize. *Oh, beautiful*, he thought. *You could never need to.*

Slowly, Minho lifted them both to their feet, Chan's arm draped around his shoulders. "Let's get you home."

"Ow."

"Just try to hold still."

"I- *ah*. Sorry."

"You've said that seven fucking times, and I'm the one patching *you* up. If I hear it again, I'm removing your tongue from your mouth."

"Noted."

After shadow-traveling into Levanter (Chan had cleverly locked the door), Minho dug out the first aid kit from the main room kitchen along with a roll of paper towels, taking the apothecary to the couch.

Chan grasped the armrest, knuckles flinching white, lips pursed in a grimace as Minho wiped the blood off the bruised bridge of his nose. "I didn't say you couldn't talk."

"Well, you just said I couldn't say sorry, and now it's all I want to say."

Minho rolled his eyes. "If I knew this was how you were going to be, I would've stopped you from saving my life."

"But you were going to *die!*"

"And I was going to accept that and have a jolly good time doing so." Chan pulled a face, which Minho imitated. "Look at me."

Before Chan could answer that he already was, Minho's thumb and forefingers grazed the hinge of his jaw and tilted his face to the right, and the hand on the armrest recoiled with a sensation that had nothing to do with the pain. Minho's brows furrowed in concentration, not even noticing how Chan jolted when his softly glowing fingertips traced over the cut below his eye socket, sealing it shut with new skin. Only when he noticed the pink flush on his cheeks did he meet his eyes, swallow his apprehension, his own blush.

Quickly, he took his hands off, both of them spinning away. "You're good."

"Thanks." Chan gingerly touched the cut. "And that was-"

"Healing magic."

"Nice. Cool."

"Thanks." Minho planted his hands on the couch cushions, tried not to peek at the blood left on his shirt. "You didn't say earlier. Why you came."

Chan snuck a look at the satchel at the foot of the couch, at the lamp that glinted inside. "I needed some encouragement to apologize."

"Right." But Minho remembered the look on his face, the stricken look of it, the sound of his voice. "Did you think I was going to leave?" Chan hesitated entirely too long. "Oh my God-"

"I didn't say-"

"I was just going for a *walk*-"

"I was just gonna give it back *in case* you wanted to! That was all." He bit lightly on his still-swollen lip. "Besides, it's. It's happened before."

If it is, you don't have to make an excuse. "Really?"

Adamantly, he shook his head. "It wasn't their fault. I was never mad at them for it, but." Chan's eyes sank to the leg of the coffee table, which looked like it had been chewed by some vicious little beaver. "Couple years ago, I had... people I cared about, here with me. Longer than just a couple days, like you. It was good, but it didn't last forever- they ended up moving out, one by one. To different places. Bigger things, bigger families. And we still care about each other, and I understand why they left, but." He drew his gaze back down to his knees, as if embarrassed. "Still. It hurt."

From the sound of it, it seemed like the drift had happened for the best, but it might as well have happened yesterday; it didn't look like he'd told anybody about this. "That's nothing to feel bad about admitting."

"Isn't it, though? I mean- it's selfish. I shouldn't feel bad that they wanted a life outside of Eldritch- I *don't*, it just. It feels like I was... like I wasn't good enough for-"

"*Hey.*" He knocked Chan's knee hard with his. "Don't you dare finish that sentence. I might not know who these people are, but if they loved you then, I'm sure they love you now. Why wouldn't they?"

"I don't know," Chan admitted. "God. You were right."

"About what?"

"About what you said. How everybody wants something, even if they shouldn't." He pushed back off his knees, leaned back against the couch, sunset luster dappling his face. "After I got bitten, I had to leave my family behind. They didn't even *know*. It might've been okay in the beginning- I could've found them again, but flash two years, five, ten, how was I going to explain why I wasn't aging a day past twenty-three? I just couldn't do that to them." His ruined curls brushed over his eyes, which glittered under the orange hue. "Last I saw of anything was back in '38, my little brother was off at college, my sister getting married. In a neon bar alley to her wife," he laughed at the last part. "I could've talked to her. Could've talked to either of them. But I didn't fit in their lives anymore."

"I guess it hit so hard because... well, I never thought I could have much after that. Like I could ever even get that much, with this life." His eyes, like petrified amber, flicked to Minho's, only for a second. "I could wish for that. To have it all back again, but it wouldn't be real, would it? It'd just be an imitation- random people following a script written by whatever I wanted, no bad parts to make the good even better, no *thing* that makes a family so irreplaceable. I don't think anyone knows what it is. But I think if it were to happen again, I'd want it to happen little by little, the real way. I got lucky enough the first time- maybe second's the charm." Chan glanced at the door like they would walk right through, like he was willing to wait for it. "I guess what I want is just something that'll stay."

"I'm right here," Minho said before he could stop himself, watching Chan turn to look at *him*. "I'm not going anywhere."

Scarred inside and out, it didn't look like the vampire had anything to say to that. "I mean, well- you already gave me a room and feed my cats every day. It'd be a waste of good hospitality."

"Right. 'Cause that's all it'd be." But Chan was laughing, so it seemed like he'd appreciated the reassurance. "So, um. Why were those guys after you?"

"Oh, they were gonna kill me."

He didn't look alarmed at Minho's casual reply, just nodded like he'd expected it- it was true, after all. But after all Chan had given, then and just now, Minho was going to give something back. "Do you want to know where I was before you?"

Chan remained silent; for a moment Minho thought he might just say, *no thanks, I'm good*. But then he angled himself towards him, his full attention on a silver platter, gave the go-ahead in the tiniest of nods. *Screw it*.

He undid the first button of his shirt, tugged the collar down with one finger to reveal the starburst burn mark on the side of his neck, same size as the palm of his hand.

"Shit," Chan murmured, soft as a wince.

"Don't worry- I did it to myself. First thing I did when I got away from him." Minho released his collar, balanced the weight of his elbow on the opposite armrest, scrolling through the books and records on the shelf with his eyes. "My last master was an asshole, to sum up the least of it. Warlock, puffed-up ego 'cause he was a human who found a way to use magic, horrible fashion sense, you get the idea. Liked to brand everything he owned." He let the implication settle, let Chan peer at the scar under his collar before looking back at his face. "Unlike most people, he didn't just stumble upon my lamp. He actually looked for me- when he heard of a being that could grant the power of the cosmos to him, he decided to shoot his shot. First time he summoned me, I just thought it'd be the regular drill."

"What did he do to you?" There was a faint anger to his voice.

"Motherfucker used a loophole." Minho felt the smallest of smiles cross his face at the memory, at the horror he had felt to live it. "One which, even with all their centuries of figuring out humans and the way they functioned, the almighty cosmos forgot to put a ban on. Which he followed up with a wish for unlimited wishes, and- well, I couldn't very well deny him." He leaned back against the couch cushions, like the ground was rocking beneath his feet again. "For

eight years, I did whatever he wanted, no matter what it was- the rules didn't apply anymore. I managed to escape by a miracle- the only one I didn't make." Between a Bessie Smith and Fred Astaire, his eye caught onto Frank Sinatra, the first record he'd given to this place. "I don't think I ever fully realized what I was supposed to be until he made me."

He didn't have to say the word for Chan start shaking his head. "No way," he said. "You're more than what you can give to people."

"If it's all I'm meant to do, I don't see how that can be true." *Give until there's nothing more anyone can take from me.*

"Well, it isn't true. I've seen you do amazing things."

"Turn on a lightbulb with a spark?"

"Make constellations with your hands. Put your cats to sleep without giving them a morsel. Change my life by being in it." Chan wasn't even smiling, or talking like he was trying to get him to know it. He was just looking at him, saying it, believing it was true. "You're a miracle all on your own, Min. You could tear this whole world apart if you wanted to."

Jesus Christ, if you even exist. Minho felt like he was dangling off the precipice of his own life, like he could tell Momo's probably smirking voice to fuck off while he destroyed an entire continent for the man in front of him. "Even if I wanted to- and I don't, because causing that much chaos right now sounds exhausting -like I've said before, it's not that easy."

"What's the reason this time?"

"Don't get up so fast- you'll open that cut on your knee." Frowning, Chan reluctantly obliged in relaxing. "While yes, djinns can do a plethora of wonderful things, our power is limited to a fourth in our own hands- the rest is dedicated to serving our masters and granting their wishes."

"That's bullshit." And then the million-dollar, lightbulb-worthy, completely original idea was born. "What if I freed you?"

Minho had to smile. "A valiant effort, but not foolproof." The vampire groaned. "With djinn wishes, you have to be extra careful- leave anything open-ended, and you could end up getting the opposite of what you wish for." He twirled his hand like a windmill: *elaborate?* "With something as huge as freedom, it could end up any kind of way depending on a certain definition, or mental state of the wisher. If someone like me were to make that kind of wish, it might end like... becoming atoms in the air, unable to be held down by a physical form. Or being reborn as something else- plant, human, animal. Or, if you've been, say, trapped in a hunk of metal since the beginning of the 1900's without ever getting to choose your own way of life or your own home or get what you wish for, freedom might mean..." *Death. Peace. Everything.* "Anything. And I don't know if I'm really ready to find out what it means for me."

There was no way Minho could read what was in his head, whether he understood or not. Whatever Chan was thinking, he was taking all of it remarkably in stride. "So it's back to the drawing board."

"Chan, I'm one of the only djinns left in this whole universe- I've known so many that tried to escape the lamp, and none of them succeeded. Do you really want to do this?"

"You're damn fucking right I do. Because no one is allowed to own your life. Not when it's so much bigger than some dinky lamp." Chan held Minho's hand with both of his. "I don't care how long it takes. You're gonna get freedom- whatever that means for you -and I'm gonna make sure of it."

Minho smirked down at his captured hand. "My knight in shining armor, are you now?"

"Please- you don't need a savior." Chan squeezed his hand. "I just want to help you get what you deserve."

In his life, Minho had created many stars, some that had burnt out and some that had found a place in the night sky. He suddenly found that none of them could ever shine as brightly as Chan's earth-splitting smile in a blazing sunset. "Okay."

Twin cups of green tea carried them through a session of half-brainstorm-half-bullshit, prep for the *real* planning, and they were walking each other back to their rooms. "Chan?"

He turned, impossibly pale in the moonlight. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

The words scraped free in a single breath, honest and genuine and out in the open. "About what I said, what I did- I didn't know what had happened to you, and I didn't think about it, and it was stupid of me to keep pushing when you weren't ready to share, so. Yeah. I'm sorry."

Chan just looked at him, corner of his mouth tugged up. "It's okay." He shrugged, easy as that. "I forgive you."

Minho watched him twist open his door, step through, throw one last flash of those dimples over his shoulder. "See you in the morning."

In that moment, Minho couldn't have wished for anything more. "Good night."

Three days later, Chan came barreling through the lobby entrance with his first wish.

He'd been off on another one of his all-day downtown trips, leaving Minho an afternoon to himself.

"Hey, *down*, Doongie," Minho commanded, waiting until his unholy trinity was civilized enough to receive their hearty meal of sardines and crackers on the courtyard floor. "Jeez, I have to tell Chan to stop

feeding you guys this stuff- it's all you eat anymore." On his right, a door banged open, and he didn't even have to look up to know who it was. "Hey, how was- *oh*. God."

Chan had grabbed a stone pillar for support, his chest rising and falling hard under his shirt. It took a lot to make a vampire sweat, which had Minho wondering just how fast he'd been running. "I- I need-"

"What is it? Did that homeless man chase you again? I swear, you've got to be more confrontational sometimes. Fuck it, I'll get the bat-

"I need to make a wish."

"What."

"I saw her. My girl- Berry. She was- I saw her in an alley and she got scared and ran across the street. I tried to follow her, but, I- I couldn't-"

"Okay, okay, um. Calm down." *His girl, huh?* Minho tried not to let any disappointment reflect on his face. "I told you, I- I can't make anyone fall in love-"

"That's not the problem. At all, just- *fuck*, I thought I lost her. After she ran away, I started looking for her- *weeks*. I was so scared she got lost, or *worse*."

Is that what he had been doing downtown all this time? "Chan, I- I know that- *obviously*, you've been missing her, and I know this is sudden, but- are you sure you really want to-"

"Minho, please." Chan's eyes were blown wide and dark, locked desperately on his, begging. "I know it's crazy, but- I love her, okay? Please, just grant me this. I promise I'll never ask for anything again."

Just two months ago, that would've been the most terrifying thing he could have said. But Minho couldn't see anything but him, think of anything but this strange girl who he'd supposedly spent weeks looking for after being separated. *He said it himself- he loves her.* What kind of dick would Minho be to deny him that? "Fine."

He quite literally collapsed in relief. "You will? You really will?"

"Yes, alright? It's what I do." Minho shook his hands out; it had been a while. "So, what's the wish?"

"Uh... do I just-"

"Yes, just say it. And visualize it, too- I don't think an assortment of fruits on your doorstep is ideal in this situation."

"Not today." Chan drew in a deep breath, let it out. "Okay. Okay, I'm ready."

"Any moment now."

"I wish- I wish that Berry would remember the way home."

A breeze blew. A bolt of lightning on a perfectly sunny day- a sign that the cosmos had listened.

Silence. Chan glanced anxiously at the door. "Just give it a second," Minho promised.

Then, the sound of- wait, *barking*? Maybe there had been a mistake.

But Chan lit up like a fireworks display. "Berry!" He used his death-given speed to bullet back into the lobby, throw open the door and sink to his knees. "There you are!"

Head fogged with *what the fuck did I do*, Minho followed after and was greeted with the sight of Chan cuddling a tawny-white motley of a cocker spaniel covered in the grime of weeks on the streets. "Hate to interrupt the moment, but- *who* is this?"

"This is Berry- my dog." Chan shut the door with his foot. "We were on a walk one day, and then it started storming, then her leash broke and she got scared and ran away, and- well, I'd been looking for her ever since. Great cuddle buddy, but horrible sense of direction." He hugged the furry creature to his chest. "Now she's *finally* here."

Mystery girl. Minho was so dumbstruck he couldn't even find it in him to be relieved. "You got three infinite, cosmic wishes given to you for free, able to grant you literally anything, and you blew your first on a *dog?*"

Chan had the nerve to look offended. "I didn't blow it- Berry's my friend. She's been with me through everything. Plus, she's not a normal dog."

There wasn't much about the tiny menace that suggested otherwise; unless you looked at her shadow, which was maybe five times bigger than her actual body, and deep into those soulless eyes to see crimson fire burning in her irises. "Hellhound."

"Showed up on my doorstep, and we've been best buds ever since."

Berry responded to that sentiment by licking his nose, scoring another bout of giggles out of him like he was a kid opening his Christmas presents. Minho felt like he was intruding, just watching them like this. "Hopefully Soonie, Doongie, and Dori won't get too jealous to see your attentions divided."

"They'll learn to live with it." From atop the crown of Berry's furry head, Chan's dimples winked up at him. "Thank you, Minho."

"You're welcome."

Crash My Car - COIN

*Imagination - Ella Fitzgerald

*A quote from Casablanca

*Sugar Blues - Ella Fitzgerald

*The Way You Look Tonight - Frank Sinatra

*Blue Orchids - Glenn Miller (x2 lol)

Buzzcut Season

Chapter 10: Buzzcut Season

Aaaaand we flash back to the present, where the past is unfortunately more relevant than the boys hoped it would be. Fortunately, we've got some friends who are willing to help, aka the first JYPFam collab.

TW: trauma.

And I'll never go home again,
Place the call, feel it start,
Favorite friend,
And nothing's wrong, when nothing's true,
I live in a hologram with you...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Telluride, Colorado - Present

*"I bust the windows out your car,"**

"We have been listening to the entire Glee soundtrack on shuffle for over four hours, and I *still* can't tell what the fucking word is!" Changbin screeched.

"It's because Britney hasn't played yet," Hyunjin pointed out.

"I dunno, I started losing braincells around My Cup," Felix mentioned. "Although I'm pretty sure it might've just been the song."

"It has that effect," Chan agreed.

Minho, who had been holding the whiteboard for a very long extent of those four hours, was one letter away from taking the marker and hanging the stick figure just to be done with it. "Guys, I don't know how many times I have to say this- it's a simple word, fitting a simple theme, you do not have to guess the whole alphabet."

"Blame Seungmin, he's the one who picked it!" Jisung protested.

Seungmin reached over a giggling Jeongin to slap him. "I will not let myself be *attacked* for a game of hangman. I swear, if no one guesses right in the next ten seconds, I'm stepping on throats."

"Oooooohhh - "

" - in a *purely* violent manner. Jesus. Disgusting, all of you."

Usually road-tripping through nine thirty at night was a formidable task for anyone with a semi-decent sleep schedule. However, if your driver was insomniac and your seven other roommates were hopped up on enough caffeine and natural infectious restlessness, that kind of luxury was saved for another time.

Jeongin peeked through the rear windshield. "Hey, look, it's that Jack in the Box that got put on the news because it used mountain lions in their burgers!"

Hyunjin followed his stare, grimaced. "It does look particularly shady."

"I think that describes every drive-through at night," Changbin commented.

Meanwhile, Felix was jamming out to the music. "Why did everyone spend an entire six seasons of Glee saying Rachel had the best

voice when Mercedes went so much harder?"

"White privilege," the coven answered.

"Sounds legit."

The gas station looked like any other roadside establishment in Colorado: old, wooden, somewhat adjacent to a log cabin that Norman Bates in a nightgown would spring out of with a kitchen cleaver. Chan was about to pull into the last open filling station spot when a dark purple Mercedes-Benz peeled in front of them and rolled neatly in like they hadn't almost dumbest side-impact collision ever.

"Well, that wasn't a law-abiding citizen," Jisung snarked.

"Unluckily for them, neither are we," Minho grouched, reaching into the glove compartment and pulling out a megaphone. Chan turned to the boys and mimed plugging his ears, an encouragement for them to follow his example.

"Bust the windows out his car," Hyunjin cheered on.

"Hey, asshole! Do you have any idea what the fuck you just-" The side door opened, and a pair of black leather wingtips stepped out. Minho's voice cut breathlessly off. "Shit."

"That's not part of the script," said Jeongin, taking his fingers out of his ears.

"Minho, you good?" asked Felix.

But Minho didn't seem to hear either of them. "Fuck." He rooted madly through the glove compartment, checking out the window, where the black wingtips were sauntering closer. *"Fuck."* Grabbing out a slip of paper, he slammed it shut, sucked in a deep breath.

Before Chan could even ask what was wrong, two polite knocks on the window jarred his focus.

Pausing the music, he rolled it down to find a striking man in a jaggedly cut blue velvet suit and flowing alabaster shirt slicing down to his sternum. "Do we have a problem here?"

"Uh." Chan turned, startling only a little to find that Minho had disappeared- megaphone under the seat, no open door, no shadow. He turned quickly back. "Nope! Nope, everything's. Everything's fine."

"Really? Because, correct me if I'm wrong, but I distinctly heard someone from your car calling my driver an 'asshole.'"

"I mean, he kinda was," muttered Seungmin, silenced by a kick from Jisung.

The man's eyes flicked to the backseat, scanning them with thinly veiled interest. When he got back to Chan, he smiled, like some gracious English gentleman. "Then hopefully you'll accept my apology instead. We didn't see your car coming."

"How could you *not*?" Hyunjin whispered in disbelief, shushed hastily by Changbin.

"Sure, we'll take it," Chan replied instead. Fighting over it in a gas station parking lot was not how he wanted to stretch his legs after a near full night of driving. "Any other problem you got?"

"Nothing that hasn't already been solved." As he straightened back up, a glimpse of sloping ink flashed behind the filmy cover of his shirt, just over his heart. "Sorry for troubling you."

"Night." Nodding his head as though tipping a hat, he sauntered off the way he'd came. "What the *hell*-"

"Who even was that?" piped Changbin.

"Fucking asshole, that's who," Felix chimed in. "What the hell could be in Colorado that he'd wear a suit like *that*?"

The Mercedes-Benz pulled out of the filling station and back into the street heading north. "He was way too nice for someone who got yelled at through a megaphone," Hyunjin grumbled. "Something was off."

"Okay, more importantly, did Minho just *die*?" asked Jeongin. "Like, where did he go?"

"I don't know," Chan shrugged. "He just noped out the minute that guy opened his door."

"You can't escape accountability for your actions, Min!" Jisung called up.

But the shotgun seat remained empty as the purple car moved ahead to meet the next green light, turned the corner, and vanished down right.

- and then Minho let his breath go, materializing back in his seat like he'd just been chunked out of a tornado.

The whole car shouted jumbled obscenities, jumped in surprise.

"What the- *fuck*, Minho!" garbled Changbin.

"Invisibility glyph," Minho wheezed out, holding up a Post-It with a penciled arrangement of circles between two fingers. "Only works if you hold your breath." Which explained why he was red in the face, gasping for air.

"I dropped my Skittles!" Jeongin grieved.

"Don't need to taste the rainbow if it's already in your blood." He glanced nervously out window to window, like an attack might come from any angle. "Is he gone?"

"Who, the guy?" asked Chan. Minho nodded, gripping onto the door handle for dear life. "Yeah, he just left, his car just turned the corner. What's the matter?"

Minho didn't answer, eyes staring huge and wide and horrified into the dashboard. "No." He shook his head. "Oh, God, *no*."

He crashed out the door and tumbled into the parking lot, fingers wrought through his hair, the rest of the coven pouring out of the car right after.

Chan was at his side in seconds. "Hey." He reached after Minho, drew him carefully into his space with a hand on his shoulder. "Slow down, love. Deep breaths, remember?"

"It can't- it can't be, I thought- I thought I wouldn't see him again."

"Who? Who is it?"

"Did you know him?" asked Jeongin.

Minho nodded, like it was all he could do, like he couldn't believe he even had to. "It's been so long, I thought- I thought maybe he was really gone?"

"Who?" Chan inquired. The djinn kept shaking his head. "Minho, who was he?"

"It was *him*."

"Who's *him*?"

"*Kai*," Minho spat raggedly, with all the hatred he could muster, a rusted grenade covered in cobwebs. "It was Kai."

It exploded in silence, leaving the others bewildered and Chan too stunned to speak. Cars came and went, lights flickered under the night's smoky clouds, but they stayed right there.

Felix looked between him and Chan. "Who's-"

"*Motherfucker*."

Chan hurled the word burning like fresh-forged steel into the ground, hissing with venom. The anger shook him like a pebble in an earthquake, a fury the rest of the boys had never seen on him, one that Minho never thought he would see again. He tried to reach for him. "Chan-

"That son of a fucking *dick*." The vampire spun away on his heel, fuming. "After what he did, he thinks he can show his *face* again?"

"Chan, don't do this," Minho attempted again.

"I looked him right in the face- I said 'good-fucking-*night*.'" Chan glowered at the faraway corner Kai's car had long since turned, at the realization that he was too late and didn't care. "I let him get away."

"You didn't *know* it was *him*. Please, just calm down-

"I fucking know now." His hand curled into a cruel fist. "I'm gonna rip that smile right off his face, make him name everything he did to you, and make him regret it."

"Hold up, *what* the fuck did he do?" Jisung questioned.

Chan made for the other side of the station where a streetlamp made a shadow, raging and ready and raring to go with Minho on his heels. "I don't give a damn how long it takes, I'm gonna find him-

"Chan-

"- I'm gonna make him suffer -"

"Chan, please-

" - and I'm gonna make it last a hundred fucking years until he knows
- "

"*Chan!*"

Minho yanked him backwards by the collar of his shirt, jerked him around.

"Please," he whispered, in a husk of a voice. He made him look into his eyes, at the tears that had started budding in them, feel the way his hands shook on his collarbones; Minho had never pleaded so much for anything. "Don't go."

Chan took in the very reason why he'd been so eager to fight telling him to stop, sank back into himself, the red in his vision dying away. "Oh," he whispered, softly humbled. "Min, I-" He stopped, started again, unsure of what to say, if an apology would even matter as another tear slipped out of the eyes of the man he loved. "Oh, God, I'm so- come here."

Minho pulled him in the rest of the way, wove his arms around his neck, buried his face in the place where it met his shoulder until he couldn't hear his own cries. Chan returned the embrace, arms wound circling his waist, so tight and brass-bound it became a promise that he would never break the hold. And, as much as the boys constantly teased them about PDA, no one could find it in them to say a damn word while the strongest celestial soldier they'd ever met sobbed shaky, broken heartaches into the shirt collar of an undead tavernkeep whose open arms only had room for one.

"It's okay."

"Oh my God."

"Everything's gonna be alright," Chan murmured, stroking the back of his head.

"He was here." Minho loosened the hug, hands shaking over Chan's collarbone. "He. He was right here, he *heard* me."

Gently, Chan touched their foreheads together. "Minho, he didn't see you."

"But he heard me. He- he walked up to the car, he heard my voice." Minho's breathing became quicker, shorter than just sobs. "He *knew* it was me."

"Minho." Chan planted his hands on his shoulders, examining his face with building concern. "*Min.*" He sent a swift nod to the boys. "Clear out. To the car."

They obeyed, and Chan carefully but briskly lead Minho to the shadow of one of the fueling pumps, vanished into it and reappeared by the side of the car- hidden from the sight of any street cars or late-night walkers. The coven formed a protective circle around them, close enough to keep anyone from inside the gas station from getting any ideas but far enough to give them some room.

In the safety of the dark, the couple sank down to the pavement, Minho grabbing choked fistfuls of air while Chan rubbed circles into his back, guiding him through the storm.

"He found me," Minho managed through a gasp as he started to slow down. "I didn't even know he was *alive* and he found me."

"It's because he's an asshole, and assholes find a way," Chan said simply. "It's nothing to do with you."

"But what if it *is*? What if- what if I lead him to us?"

"How would you have done that?"

"It was-" Minho's head thunked on the side door. "The *spell*. The one I used to take out the dökkálfar at the bar. What other being could use magic like that?"

"You don't know that's why. Come on, it could've just been random- maybe he wanted to go on a nature hike and see if his wardrobe could handle it."

But Minho didn't laugh. "He saw you. He saw *all* of us. What if he finds us again?"

Chan spared a glance at the pavement, searching for something inside of himself to offer. "Then we won't let him get to you," he concluded. That much he could promise. "He's gone, now, Min. You're safe." Minho released a final exhale, serrated at the edges, and he draped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in close. "I'm right here, remember? I'm not going anywhere." Minho nodded, hugged him back, trying as hard as he could to believe it all.

The rest of the boys swayed awkwardly like reeds to the same wind. It didn't seem like there was much of a way to comfort their friend without knowing the whole story. Seven pairs of eyes exchanged unsteady contact: *someone's got to ask*.

It was Seungmin who got down to his haunches, a golden retriever with a stick, equal parts compassionate and deliberate. "You alright?"

Minho cut his eyes towards him, chuckled dryly. "I'm fine, Seungmin. Thanks for asking." He looked up at the boys, which cued a timely pause in their shifting. "Hope I didn't scare the lot of you too much."

"It's cool, we get it," said Jeongin, bobblehead-nodding. "Scary past things are like that."

"Scary past things," he scoffed, shaking his head. "You're right about that." Minho scooted away from Chan, who obediently tucked his arm back into his side. "Guys, I might've really landed us in some deep shit this time."

"And I started a fire before we left the motel," Jisung chimed. "What else is new?"

"We've all made mistakes on our own, Minho," said Felix. "But if this guy's as big an asshole as I'm starting to think he is, it might not entirely be your fault."

"Which leads to the matter of you telling us who he is," Changbin cut in.

"Terrible seg," Hyunjin noted.

"Least I made it."

"Are you guys sure you want to know?" Minho challenged. "This isn't exactly bedtime story material."

In response, the monsters followed Seungmin's lead, dropping down cross-legged before him.

"Bedtimes are for the mentally stable," announced Jeongin. "And even if we had one, we'd obliterate it just for you."

"If this guy's a threat, we need to know how to face him," said Changbin.

"And if he's a nuclear douchebag, we need to know just how bad we have to fuck him up," added Felix.

Chan covered Minho's hand with his; Minho gave it a squeeze. With his coven looking staring at him from all angles, he couldn't see much of a reason to hide it anymore. "What the fuck- it's been long enough. You of all people deserve to know."

"'Twas a dark and stormy night- well, I don't remember the night part, just remember that it was dark and stormy -in the year 1930. Everyone was vibing through the '29 stock market crash, which was probably a good explanation as to how my lamp ended up in the *black* market."

Jisung choked. "You were in the black market?"

"Yes, Jisung, *my lamp* was in the black market. And not whatever Playboy-mafia bullshit you're imagining- I wasn't even aware of it. I wasn't aware of anything happening in the outside world." A dark

cloud passed over his face. "Until Kai summoned me for the first time."

"He'd been tracking me down for years- he was obsessed with magic, using books and runes and other dark spells to make up for what he hadn't been born with, to stay immortal the way we have. He studied every monster on the planet to figure out how to best it, including djinn. He knew about the rules that applied to all those who wished upon the lamp- no resurrection, no making anyone fall in love, et cetera, et cetera. Didn't like that one bit. So, to all those rules, he wished to be the exception." The scar on his neck itched; it did that when he remembered it was there. "As long as he had my lamp, I couldn't leave, retreat from any of it. Meaning I couldn't refuse him- there was no limit to what he could ask for. So, without a choice or any real idea what was going to happen, I granted his wish."

"From there on out, I was trapped at his service, doling out anything he wanted. It was kinda funny- he never wished for love from anyone- he didn't need it to get what he wanted. He never wished for a resurrection- whoever he lost would be replaced. See, power was the one thing he could never get enough of- didn't matter how he got it, just so long as it became his. And, most importantly, as long as he never had to get his hands dirty." Minho glanced blankly at his own palms, remembering the destruction they'd caused. "I helped carry out the growth of his empire, made him stronger every day. Went around finding more monsters who'd give their power to him- those who accepted joined the ranks in whichever way he saw fit, and those who refused were exterminated. He'd make sure we listened- always kept me close to him. I didn't go through it all alone- I had an ally. You've always been curious as to how Momo and I met."

"Fucking *knew it*," Hyunjin whispered.

"Shut *up*," hissed Seungmin.

"And in '38, we tried to help a peryton- this kid, who'd been captured by Kai, but." *A storm. A star. A bullet through his head.* "We couldn't.

And that was the last straw. So, during a storm one night, we managed to escape, and wouldn't you know it, six years later, I'm found and stocked in some antique store, gifted to a lucky vampire and." He looked sidelong at Chan, shrugged a shoulder. "Well, the rest is history."

In the cross-legged story circle they had formed, the group rumbled with potential energy. Changbin started to rise from his seat, followed by the others, taking a suspicious edge up left. "We're just gonna go for a snack run. Y'know, up north, down the road-"

"You all left your wallets in the car, sit the hell down," Chan intervened, shutting that shit down fast.

Grumpily, they did. "I appreciate the energy from all of you- really, I do," Minho told them. "But it doesn't matter if he's human deep down- he's strong. *Really* strong, even without all the black magic under his belt. He's managed to get a lot of powerful monsters on his team- his driver was probably one of them. I barely managed to get away from him with help. I don't want to see what he'd do to you guys now."

"Come on, we can tag team him!" Jeongin suggested eagerly. "Ambush him in his car- he won't even see it coming!"

"That's *exactly* what he'd see coming. If my suspicions are correct- and they always are, the trauma -he's just dreaming of ways to get us alone, even if he has to chase us all the way out of Colorado. Once you're in trouble with him, there's no way to get out of it. Believe me, I've been trying ever since I left him."

"Do you really think he'll be tracking us?" Felix asked skeptically.

"If he thinks you're hiding me, he's probably already drawing the map of where we'll stop next." The boys sobered, their looks uneasy. "If we run, we could have a whole battalion waiting for us back at Eldritch. If we try anything without a proper plan or failsafe, we dig the hole even deeper."

"Well," muttered Changbin. "That does put a damper on our vacation."

"The one time any of us decide to go outside, too," Hyunjin mused thoughtfully.

"We believe you, Minho," Seungmin said quickly, before their comments could be interpreted as anything else. "And obviously, we wouldn't want to do anything that would purposely put our coven in danger, right?" A pause. Genuine hesitation. "*Right*, guys?"

"*Right*," answered the boys, some a little later than others.

"But if Kai's gonna have eyes on us everywhere," Jisung started in, "where do we go?"

Brows furrowed, Chan reached back into a shadow under the car; in the driver window, one could see it emerge from beneath the phone mount and grab it off, where it slunk away back onto the rest of his arm. "We're in Telluride, which means we're not too far," he said, eyes on the GPS. "Might not like the intrusion, but I think we've got a couple friends who'll be willing to help."

The forest of Arcadia lay on the outskirts of Telluride, beyond miner small towns and mountains, through groves of lustrous pine and spruce that crowded the sky for space with the stars. When it got to the point that there were no more roads to follow, where the growth of the trees allowed for only swathes of moonlight to filter through their branches as silver rays, a point that no mortal lost after dark would have dared to cross, they trekked through the underbrush on foot.

The Cimmerian shade and ominous threat of Kai should have haunted their every step, made them jump at every snapping twig, but the bulbs of light Felix sent up over their heads lit the way, casting a faint bright hue over the meadowflowers sprouting from the grass, like the ones that grew back home in Levanter.

Jeongin fussed with the wrinkles on his sweater, smoothed down the cowlick that had sprung out of his head, anything to give his hands something to do.

"Innie, she's your sister," Hyunjin reassured him. "It's gonna be fine."

"Once we tell her we're on the run from a magical mobster, she won't care enough to give a shit," said Jisung helpfully.

"Yeah, well / give a shit." The gumiho flicked a speck of dirt off his jeans. "I mean, she's probably still gonna be taller than me, and I'm willing to bet she dyed her hair again because every color ever looks great on her, but we haven't seen each other in the flesh for *six* years. I should at least look presentable."

"Like you ever," Changbin snarked up ahead.

"Shut up! *Ugh*." He pulled back Seungmin by the arm. "You. Honest opinion. Do I look okay?"

*"When I see your face,"** Chan sang in the lead.

"There's not a thing that I would change," Felix and Changbin harmonized in grinning synchrony.

Seungmin threw a pinecone at them, returning his attention to Jeongin. "Uh. Well." Hyunjin and Jisung turned eagerly to watch. Jeongin raised his eyebrows worriedly. "It's nothing, really- I mean, nothing's wrong! Just." Before he could lose any nerve, he smoothed down his upturned collar on the left side, dusted the creases off his shoulders, and flicked a leaf out of his hair in the span of five seconds. "There." He proceeded to stub his toe on a pebble in his haste to speed up. HyunSung snickered wickedly. "Die. Die in a hole, die."

"So, when're we gonna know when we're close?" Felix piped up. "Doesn't look like they have a neon sign announcing their hideout."

"And we're sure they won't mind us just showing up at their doorstep?" Minho joined. "What if Jihyo thinks we're Jehovah's Witnesses again?"

"Please, she wouldn't make that mistake twice," said Chan dismissively. "We're just gonna ring the doorbell, make our case, and see how it goes. So long as no one trips over anything, I think we should be okay."

The twang of a tripwire resounded through the brush.

Hyunjin rolled his eyes. "I fucking *told* you not to touch it."

"In my defense," said Jisung, still crouched over the creeper tendril stretching between trees. "Chan was the one who said something."

Minho pursed his lips. "Oh boy."

A flurry of flowered vines shot out from the trees, coiled around their arms, legs, and everything else, and snatched them off the ground, making a midair tapestry of eight multicolored pests caught in a pink spiderweb. Before them, another dropped from the canopy like a rope, and a figure slid down off it, obscured by the dark. "You've trespassed on holy grounds," the voice thundered, "and now you shall face your *punishment!*"

"Sana?" called Chan. He looked to be frozen in skydive. "Chill out, it's us!"

The figure faltered. She hurried forward, and Sana stepped out into the spotlight. Her orange hair was bundled up in a messy topknot, and she wore a t-shirt for The Runaways over pale blue sweats. She looked delighted with her catch. "Chan?"

"Holy crap, *hey!*"

"*Dude!*"

"It's been too long. How've you been?"

"Great! Didn't know I'd have to run out here in the middle of the night, but great!"

"Obviously. The forest looks amazing on you, I mean, the *plants*."

"Oh, stop. Any faerie would react the same."

"Hope you don't mind I brought a few others who'd like to say hi."

Sana gasped. "Oh my God, the whole *gang*."

Minho looked like Alice had tried to dive headfirst down the rabbit hole. "Hey, Sana."

Changbin, Mufasa mid-fall with a peace sign. "'Sup."

Jeongin, cover of *NSYNC's No Strings Attached. "Hi!"

Jisung, Spider-Man leap, sniffed one of the flowers. "Is this mandevilla?"

She beamed. "Good eye."

Hyunjin was Jesus being launched off the cross. "Sorry to be the buzzkill, but we're kinda here to discuss the fate of our lives."

"Aw man, hate when that happens."

"And if it's not too much trouble," Seungmin squeaked out, a discarded rag doll. "One of your vines is in a very uncomfortable place right now, so, if we could speed this up."

"My head does not like this much blood in it," added Felix, who looked like a giant had been shaking him upside down for lunch money. He held out a thumbs-up that had converted into a thumbs-down with his position. "It's cool though."

"Right. Sorry."

A wave of her hand, and the vines slunk back like yo-yos into their homes twined around the limber pines; gravity regained control, plummeting the boys to the ground. She pulled Chan up first, welcomed him in a hug. "We really have to make time for better meeting circumstances."

Chan smiled. "I can make time for that."

The next appearance was made a touch less agile as Sana's- it crashed down in a three-point-landing inches from their faces in a suit of armor, sturdy, shining steel lined with glimmering gold, rose red hair tumbling in thick waves.

"Enough with the surprise entrances, please!" Hyunjin wailed.

"It's okay, Jihyo," Sana assured the rising valkyrie. "It's just Stray Kids. They stopped by for our help."

"We sort of need it right now," Chan said, a little timidly.

"Sorry for waking you?" Jeongin supplied in a nervous attempt to smooth things over.

Jihyo sighed. "I'm just glad you weren't another Jehovah's Witness." Running a hand through her hair, her armor melted away on her frame, a fluffy royal blue robe taking its place. "Come inside. I assume we've got a lot to talk about."

Felix's jaw had dropped. "Did she just-"

"She Ra," Seungmin whispered in amazement.

"It is moments like these where I'm reminded that I am *very* bisexual," Changbin said under his breath.

"For the honor of Grayskull," Jisung intoned sagely.

Hell In Heaven, formerly home to a pair of jiangshi wives who'd left in search of a darker habitat, was the kind of deep-wood dwelling that thrill seekers spent a night in for shits and giggles, only to have their souls corrupted by entities so feared by man they weren't even known (Jisung thought it looked like the Minecraft spooky mansion, Jeongin argued the Northwest Manor. They eventually settled for both).

Pre-conjuring, the rest of Twice welcomed them with open arms, despite having all been in their pajamas ready to watch Our Flag Means Death for the third time. Momo bounded from the living room couch in a bleach blond blur to the wall to the chandelier to give Minho a hug he rarely accepted from anyone. Jeongin, shivering like a nervous puppy and tapping his foot so vigorously it was bound to leave a mark on the magenta velvet carpet, shot up straight the minute Jeongyeon swept into the room.

Jeongyeon cocked her head, as if appraising him. "Hey, kit." Somehow, in a black hoodie and grey sweats, it looked regal.

"Hi." Jeongin gulped nervously, willed his foot to stop tapping. "I, um. Like your hair."

This year's color was vibrant turquoise; she'd kept it pinned back with a claw clip. "Those boots will never make you taller than me."

"I really fucking hoped you wouldn't say that."

Jeongyeon grinned. "Bring it in." And she hugged him, muffling his face in her shoulder.

They'd settled the boys on the expansive purple couch of their jacquard living room; it was somewhat of a relief that, even as they were discussing a warlock who had the power to indenture their lives away, they still found moments to comfort them with some of Trader Joe's finest and reply accordingly ("That smarmy fuck," - Nayeon, through a mouthful of fig and olive crisps, at the part when Kai approached the car).

Jihyo, seated like a queen on an ottoman across from them, folded her arms when they'd finished the tale. "And how sure are you that he's got his eye on you?"

"He got right out of our car after hearing my voice," replied Minho.

"And he checked the backseat like we were stolen kegs of raw milk or something," Hyunjin spoke up.

Momo, leaning against the cobblestone fireplace chimney in pink sweats and a Revolutionary Girl Utena tank, nodded her approval. "If Kai's anything, he's thorough. Remember the time I saw one of his bodyguards at the market? At this point, he's probably already running background checks."

Jihyo collected herself heavily. "Very well. Mina, bring in the memory spell."

The memory spell, as it turned out, was several jugs of lavender*, bay*, echinacea*, and rosemary* brewed in water, poured into the cauldron carried out from the top right corner of the room.

"It's completely safe," Mina promised, setting two purple candles on either side of the cauldron. "I use this all the time to find out who steals my cat hoodies."

"It's Chaeyoung," Dahyun stage whispered, pointing to the culprit, who whapped her in the back of the head with her bag of freeze-dried strawberries.

"Do you have to do this for every spell you cast?" asked Felix.

"Not all the time- but for this situation, we need to be sure." Lighting the mugwort incense, she settled the bundle in a quartz bowl. "Close your eyes- focus on the darkness you see. Even if it's hard, let your guard down. The more open you are with your memories, the better."

With the heavy scent of barberry oil and incense mingling with the air, they closed their eyes, placed their trust in the sorceress. Mina knelt before the cauldron, hands resting on either shaft. As she leaned over the brew, Chaeyoung dove forward and readily gathered her hair in a ponytail with a scrunchie so it wouldn't fall inside, remaining just in case.

"Reveal to me that which I seek," Mina chanted, voice resonating as though carrying through a concert hall, pupils ringing with a hazy moonlight shade of silver. *"Great mother, open my inner eye so that I may truly see."*

The rest of Twice hung back bated-breath silence, watching while she worked her magic. Smoke drifted towards the ceiling, curling around the crystals of the chandelier. The fire in the hearth flickered, touched with white, with violet. Slowly, as the vision formed in the surface of the cauldron brew, the atmosphere grew more and more uncertain; a charge in the air, like someone had dropped a toaster in the lake, the flames on the candles listing to one side, like the whole room had been tilted askew.

"Hm," Mina grunted, lips pulling into a frown, fingers tightening on the cauldron handles, silver haze spreading over her irises, visions becoming increasingly clear. Chaeyoung gripped her shoulders from behind- grounding her to the physical world while she peered through the eyes of another.

She settled back on her heels, and the air came to rest. Held breath was released, and the boys opened their eyes.

"My ears are ringing," Jeongin whispered, unsure if he could even talk. "Are they supposed to be ringing?"

"That's normal," Mina said, back in her normal tone. "Come take a look."

One by one, they rose up to ring around the cauldron, staring with a bird's eye view at a rewind of their road trip.

Changbin pointed at the vision. "This is the gas station we were at weeks ago."

"Security footage from while you were there- the third eye lets you leave no stone unturned."

Jisung tried to look deeper. "Was Kai there?"

Mina pulled him back. "An undercover hunter was manning the counter, caught a glimpse of this." She dipped two fingers into the brew and moved left, rippling the waves into a close-up view of Minho and Changbin bickering by the fuel pump. "You haven't been in contact with anything Kai related since those two guys in 1944, right?" Minho nodded, not taking his eyes off the vision. "He must've tipped him off."

Jeongin exhaled shakily, hand on the rim of the cauldron, and Felix covered it with his. "Has he been following us for that long?"

"Not the *whole* trip- thankfully you chose not to stay in any motels, for whatever reason, making it difficult him to track you through Utah, although, according to The Mother, he was put back on your scent by one bored store clerk."

"Damn cabbage man," Seungmin cursed.

"Yo, you watch ATLA?" Chaeyoung moved to high-five him but was held back by Tzuyu.

"Save the nerding out for later."

"The whole run-in with the boogeyman happened on its own- that was just bad luck." Changbin muttered something like, 'of course.' "But it was the bar where he caught up with you guys."

All the blood drained out of Minho's face. "Do we know how or why?" Hyunjin asked for him.

“It wasn’t anything any of you did in particular that lead him to you. He’d sent a band of dark elves after you- the ones you fought behind Cloak & Dagger. When Minho used that star spell to finish them off, it must’ve confirmed it all.”

”Made him have to see for himself,” Chan concluded grimly.

Minho released a sound that was half sob, half gasp; Changbin lead him away from the cauldron and back to the couch, where the rest of the boys followed in stupefied silence.

”I know it’s a lot to take in right now.” Jihyo took her place before them, a regent and her subjects. “You can take as long as you need.”

“Even with the magic we all have, no one here can promise that Arcadia is the safest place for you guys,” said Momo. “But if Kai does come, we have your back.”

“Thank-“ Minho swallowed the crack in his voice, banished it to the pit of his being. “Thank you, Momo. Thank all of you.”

Jihyo nodded; it was for duty as much as solidarity. “If you can, get some sleep. The night’s been long enough as it is.”

“Thank you,” Chan attempted, glancing at the dark circled eyes still wide open, the too-stiff posture ready to bolt at any given moment. “Um.” Minho had buried his face in his hands, trying to figure out when he’d let himself be so foolish. “We’ll try.”

Buzzcut Season - Lorde

*Bust Your Windows - Glee Cast

*Just The Way You Are - Bruno Mars

*Lavender: Silence, serenity, devotion.

*Bay: Wisdom, intuition.

*Echinacea: Strength, wellbeing.

*Rosemary: Remembrance, memories.

Sweater Weather

Chapter 11: Sweater Weather

We're flashing back in time for another backstory today- this time to find out just how Chan became our favorite creature of the night.

TW: brief mentions of death, racism and homophobia.

'Cause it's too cold,

For you here,

And now, so let me hold,

Both your hands in the holes of my sweater...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Los Angeles - 1927

It was finally happening.

Finally, after years of writing and wishing and pitching, Chan was getting the break he'd been waiting for.

It had been six whole months since Chan had dragged the lot of them into the abandoned warehouse down the street from the car wash with whatever instruments anyone had on them for Blue Orchids. It hadn't even been that serious at first, just a little activity to lift their spirits for a while- it wasn't like anyone had anything else to do. LA was hectic, but work kept every guy around busy, and the only real way to get excited about anything was if you read about it happening in the news somewhere else. But, now, in his messenger

bag and stuffed there by his own hands was the contract itself, all the proof there in the ink on the paper that it hadn't been so foolish to hold on to hope; when one had gotten so used to dreaming, there wasn't time worth wasting when something actually came true.

Dropping out of the taxi, he yelled thanks to the driver as he headed down east. Never would be the prettiest part of the city of angels- houses were squat, compact, roof shingles coming loose, paint fading under the sunlight, and people could hardly keep the grass on their lawns from dying of the heat every summer. But, even with his apartment in the city, it had been home as long as he could remember; everyone knew everyone, which meant everyone knew him.

"If it isn't the Boy Wonder," said Mr. Truman from across the street in one of his slouchy sweaters, watering his tomatoes. He was the only person Chan's mom trusted to give her garden advice. "Press let you off the hook?"

Chan was still wearing the gray glen check suit and red tie he saved for work- it was kind of the only nice thing he owned. "Even better- I left."

"How bold. Am I right to assume that you finally got one of your songs accepted?"

"Indeed you are. Don't know how it happened, but it did."

"Maybe God felt bad about letting the Prohibition happen."

He laughed. "Suppose this means I should probably thank you for lending your choir director knowledge to me for all those years."

"Only because I knew you would use it wisely." Mr. Truman flicked the hose up ahead. "Go on, now- your mother would hate to find out you told me about your amazing news before her."

Chan saluted. "You're the patron saint to every artist in Los Angeles." The man rolled his eyes over a droll smile. "Until we meet again!"

He barely got three running steps- plus four if you counted the one he managed to make over a crack because damn if he was letting superstition ruin this lucky streak he had going -until the blond flapper girl flung the door open and draped over the gate. "Alice, how's things?"

"Better, now that you're here," she replied in her easy, airy tone. She slipped a cigarette from under her collar. "You got a light?" Dutifully, he pulled one out from his breast pocket. "You're a funny guy, y'know. Why have a lighter if you don't even smoke?"

"Little something I learned from my dad- if you can't do anything else, you can light their cigarette. But really- you've gotta come up with a better excuse to see me."

Alice giggled, smoke streaming ghostly out of her nose. "But you're so busy all the time."

"Because time waits for no one." Tucking the lighter back into his pocket, he started back on his way. "And it's certainly never waited for me."

Chan waved the rest of his way down the block, flashing smiles and tipping a cap at neighbors who said hello to the boy they'd watched grow up until he skidded to a halt in front of house 0325, butter yellow and always welcoming. He didn't even think anything of it when he found the door unlocked- just stepped right inside and dropped his jacket and coat on the rack.

"You will *not* believe what I-"

A muffled whimper, cut off by a rustle of a hit. So silent you could hear a tear drop.

The tiniest step right, and he could see 1. The Witness for the Prosecution lying facedown on the ground 2. his family bound in the middle of the living room and 3. his mother with tears in her eyes, vigorously shaking her head.

Two hands like iron clamped around his arm and hurled him clear off his feet, over the couch and hard as a rolling stone onto the wooden floor, pain searing through his back.

"Chan!" Hannah cried.

"Quiet." The man standing in the doorway hissed. "I don't have to get the gag, do I?" His hair was greased to perfection and suit pitch black as death.

"Junho, she's a kid." Another appeared in the bedroom hallway- his hair was light brown, almond eyes creased in mild annoyance. "Let it slide."

Chan shook off the stars that swirled through his head. Just barely, he could make out two more emerging from the kitchen, heads craned as if this were an interesting scene to watch. "Who the hell are you guys?"

"Man, I was kinda hoping that fall took him out so we wouldn't have to answer," whined another, with dark brown hair and a rounded face.

"Does it matter?" muttered the one that was filing his nails on the letter opener, black hair swept out of his face, with a jawline that could have sliced cheese. "They're gonna be dead anyways."

"Dead?" Just what the hell was this day turning into? Chan pushed up to his feet, made himself a barrier between the strangers and his family. "What are you going to do to them?"

A hand grazed his wrist; his own dad, a streak of blood lining the side of his face. "Son, stand down. We're no match for them."

"What're you *talking* about? Wha- what happened? How did they even get *in*?"

"This wasn't really the hardest place to break in." A man with dark hedgehog-like hair poked his head out, their whole pitcher of coffee in hand. "By the way, y'all got great coffee."

They don't look like door-to-door salesmen. "We're good people- we've done nothing wrong."

"That's what all you mortals claim to be," hissed Junho. "Until you learn that it doesn't matter whether you've been bad or good- the reaper comes for everyone in the end."

"Yours just happened to come a little earlier," said the round-cheeked man, as if they were doing them a favor.

"Mortals?" Chan's mind was reeling. "What even are you people?"

"Not people," mumbled Lucas.

"What?"

The man with light brown hair nodded to the associate with the letter opener. "Taecyeon, you wanna bring this one home?"

Taecyeon looked up from his filing, tepidly miffed. "Why me?"

"Tae."

"Oh my God, *fine*." He rolled his eyes to Chan's; even from afar, he could feel the icy chill of his indifference. "Unfortunately, you missed the talk, but you heard your brother. We aren't human. I would say it'd be obvious because no one just steals into someone's home and ties them up to kill them, but humans basically do that all the time, so instead I'll say this." Suddenly his expression was cool, razor-sharp, deadly serious. "We're not human in the way we're going to lump you in with the rest of your folks, drain you of every drop of blood in your body, and let the cops write it off as another cold case. I don't

even have to waste time saying it out loud- you're already imagining it."

Chan wanted to deny it, cuss him out, say he had no idea what he was talking about, but he could. For the short, doomed life of him, he could feel it as if it were already happening, in the way his bones turned to jelly beneath his skin, the way his blood ran cold and head went both light and heavy on his shoulders at the same time. *This was supposed to be the best day of my life, not the last.*

"Minjun, Wooyoung," snapped Junho. "Rope him up. Let's make this quick."

The fuzz at the edges of Chan's vision began to clear as they slouched out of position, rope slinging off of their shoulders and into pale hands, and his mother's sobbing grew louder, more uncontrollable, Hannah shrieking "no, no, no," even though, yes, this was happening, and nothing could stop it. *This is happening, and I can't stop it.*

In moments, he was going to feel his blood siphoned out of every vein in his body, taking with it every lyric he hadn't written, every melody, every dream that hadn't come true. *My future, and theirs with it.* "Wait."

"Oh, tell me we don't have to gag him," grouched Taecyeon.

"Don't kill them." Minjun held up a hand for Wooyoung to stop. *Goodbye, beautiful blue orchids.* "Just take me."

"No," Hannah wailed, almost drowned out in the protests of the rest of his family.

But it had the desired effect. Junho turned his attention on him, intrigued. "Trying to play the hero, are we?"

"My sister is fifteen, my brother is twelve. They need parents to care for them."

"And you're assuming I give a shit about that?"

"If you give a shit about anything." Chan stepped forward. Minjun and Wooyoung didn't move. "I don't know what you've done, if you've taken lives older or younger than theirs, but if you spare them, I can promise that things won't get messy."

"Messy?" Junho smiled. For the first time, Chan could see his canines- too sharp, too elongated, like a snake's. "Are you saying you'll fight us?"

"Chan, *no*," his father said sharply, the edge sliding out of his voice.

"If I have to." Chan forced himself to ignore them. "I don't think a proper crime scene will encourage a cold case, do you?"

Junho cocked a brow, amused. His eyes trailed over Chan, as if already dictating the best ways to tear him limb from limb. *If I can keep him from doing the same to them, it'll be worth it.* "Release them."

The coffee guy choked. "What?"

"What?" murmured Minjun.

"What," breathed out his mother. "Chan, please, *no!*"

"It's okay," he promised, not taking his eyes off Junho. If Chan looked away for one second, he knew he'd crack, falter, fall apart. "I know what I'm doing."

He listened as they were unbound, rope thumping on the carpet. Watched as they gathered themselves back up on their feet, tripped over each other's shoes as they were shepherded out of the living room towards the door. Chan tried to memorize as much as he could: his mother taking Lucas into her arms, cradling him to her side; he'd taken their family picture with them. The set of his father's

shoulders- straight as a knife, always stable. Hannah's red-rimmed eyes widening on his for what she realized to be the last time.

Chan smiled, the kindest one he could offer. "Go on," he said. "It's gonna be okay."

But while one could close their eyes, he couldn't close his ears to the sound of his name being called out desperately by his little sister being cut heartlessly short Taecyeon slamming the front door.

"That hit kinda hard," murmured the coffee guy.

"Shut *up*, Jay," the round-cheeked man snapped. "You're on thin fucking ice as it is- no one wants you here."

"Enough fighting, boys," Junho interrupted. His snake smile hadn't left his face for a second. "We have a guest to attend to."

One by one, they left their positions, leisurely, with all the self-assurance of beings who had experienced the world in a higher level than you would ever understand, circling him like horses in a walker, eying him up like the prize calf of an auction.

"I must say, I was almost moved by that sentiment about your family," said Junho. "No blubbering, no breakdown in the middle. Bravo."

Chan's heart jackhammered in his chest; he committed himself to remembering every beat. "You don't usually spend this much time talking to the people you're about to kill, do you?"

"No," admitted Junho. "Playing with one's food's a childish habit for anyone." Jay was elbowed by a stoic Taecyeon. "But, as a final gift, I wanted to give you something to remember."

"I don't have any last words for you."

"Then I suggest that you take a good look at the light." Junho stepped in close, bared his fangs. "Your world's about to get a little darker."

He lunged forward, and Chan gasped as he felt it: two syringes puncturing his throat, a snakebite. There was no sun out the window, just a bright light hidden by the clouds, making everything gray.

Hold on to the light, he thought, a child closing their closet to keep out the monster inside. But the monster, too strong than some silly child, threw open the door, and the world became darkness.

Before he died, he was able to feel his heart stop. Slow and steady, a turtle perfectly content with losing the race, slipping on a pebble, and finally falling on its stubby little face, accepting failure.

He was also able to feel it start again.

It was like he'd been impaled with a cattle prod that shocked him back to life, shooting him up as he sucked in the massive gasp a person took when they realized 'holy shit I didn't die.'

"Holy shit, I didn't die," Chan panted, hands grasping at the dirt and grass? "Wait, am I dead? Is this heaven? Hell? Purgatory?"

He was in his backyard- patches of grass both green and yellow, rusted over barbecue, and sitting in the tire swing hanging from the gnarled half-dead oak tree was- "What the fuck are *you* doing here?"

"Welcome back, fledgling," greeted Minjun, without a hint of offense. "No, you're not dead- I mean, kinda, but not."

Chan brushed the grass off his clothes, blinking in a recollection of flashes what had led up to this moment. *Ambush, vampires, self sacrifice, Hannah's red eyes, then-*

"Shit, Hannah." Chan pushed himself off the ground, head swirling like a fish bowl in a whirlpool. "Everyone, I-"

"Whoa, easy there, soldier." Minjun rushed out of the swing to steady him as he teetered off to the side. "You just woke up from *death-*

might wanna let it settle in first.”

”But you said I wasn’t dead.”

”And you’re not, but, well-“

”Well, *what*? Where’s my family? Where’s the rest of your group?” A cold icicle of a knot formed in his throat. “What did you do to them?”

”Your family is unharmed, as you last saw them- and by now long gone.” Minjun scoffed derisively. “And my group with them.”

”Sucks for you, I guess. Wait. How long have I been out? Months? *Years*?”

”Thirty minutes,” Minjun deadpanned. “And a lot’s happened since then.”

”Well- fuck, like what? Last I remember, I was in the middle of accepting my death when a guy *bit* me.”

”Do you think you could save the questions for after?”

”What if I forget them?” He pinched the bridge of his nose, inhaled. “Okay, okay.”

”So, thirty minutes ago, you actually *were* going to die.” Chan breathed a sigh of relief. Minjun blinked. “Except, well. You didn’t.”

”Okay, I know you said no questions, but I’m really confused here. You say I’m not dead, but I’m not alive either. Where does that leave me?”

”You remember Junho, right? Well, he was about to bleed you dry when I had a change of heart.” Chan frowned. “Yeah, I know. It shocked me too. But, before he could fully drain you, I... took over. Kept you from dying. Which, while it did save you, changed you too.”

”Changed me? How?”

Minjun opened his mouth, closed it, trying to figure how to give his words the semblance of sanity, the way Chan was when he tried to break down the meanings behind his lyrics. "You know... what we are, right? Even though we never said." Nod. "Well, um. When... when a vampire bites a person, but doesn't kill them, what happens instead is that... the person... becomes... one."

"What?" Minjun stayed quiet. "One *what?*" Chan's fingers tangled with the grass, pulling on the roots that didn't have the strength to support him. "Tell me."

"Do I really have to?"

It was like standing in a glass cage in the ocean, waiting for the sides to blow, trying to accept the violent, inevitable end when suddenly it happened. "No."

The answer was said on impulse, in denial, in the futile hope that saying so would make it untrue.

Chan's thin veil of protection fractured, and the glass shards gave way to all ends, air punched out of his lungs, water forcing itself down his throat, woozy little black spots bubbling up his vision until everything was black and sinking. "Tell me it isn't true."

And the worst part of it all was how Minjun, who'd watched it happened, simply looked at him, sympathetic, wishing he could. "I'm sorry. Truly, I am—"

"*No!*" Chan shot up, not even caring how his brain reacted to the sudden movement. Right now, it was the clearest thing about him. "You said it yourself- he was gonna kill me!"

"But he *didn't*. You didn't sacrifice yourself by will- you didn't *want* to die."

"But I was *ready!*" Shoving his dreams and reaching for the light and so, so ready. "I didn't ask to be *spared*- not when I wouldn't even be

human anymore!”

“With time, you learn to accept it. Everyone does-“

”Time.” The one thing Chan had never been able have enough of.

“Well, I guess I don’t have to worry about. I can’t die, can I?”

”I assure you, I-“

“If I were to die, how would I do it?” Minjun’s lips pursed tightly.

“Really, I want to know. Stake through the heart, just like the myths? Or something cleaner to get the job done?”

”I just didn’t think you deserved to die.”

“That’s a decision you didn’t make,” Chan snarled through gritted teeth- who even knew how *those* looked anymore? “My family walked out that door thinking I’d be your bloodbag the minute they turned their backs, and now- now what do I say? How am I supposed to find them and tell them that their oldest son became some fucking *monster* that Lucas has only ever read about?”

”Well, that about answers your question, doesn't it?” Minjun’s tone wasn’t questioning, just sad, sober. “You can’t die. You can’t age. Even if you lied to them, you would only get a year or two before they realized it.” Chan hunched his shoulders, clenched his fists. “It would be foolish to run back to them, cruel to stay- you will outlive all of them and never look a day older than this. Believe me: it’s better that they think you’re dead. At least you got to say goodbye.”

That shouldn’t even make sense. “Then what do I do?” *How do I know who I am anymore?* “How am I supposed to live like this?”

”Well, that’s when I come into play.”

Chan glowered at him. “You’ve helped me enough for one lifetime.”

”But if you want, I can help you get used to this one.” Minjun attempted a cautious step forward. “There’s nothing in this world I

know of that can make you human again, but what I can do is ease you into this one- you don't have to stop living. There's still options for you."

"What options? Wander around sucking the life juice out of people until I get sick of it?"

"My group isn't the best example, I know. But not everyone's like Junho- you don't have to lose everything that made you human. There's still more you can do." Chan fixed his focus on the patch of grass by the edge of the fence. "This life is a difficult thing to learn alone, to live it. You can, but I can teach you how to handle the reins. Perhaps even make up for what I did."

"I don't think anything can make up for what you did."

"You're immortal now, fledgling," said Minjun wryly. "It would be a waste to hold your grudge forever. Besides, you won't find it anywhere else: after I bit you, my coven left me behind. I told them I would stay and help you- no one else seemed to be willing."

"Am I supposed to thank you?"

"You don't have to forgive me- you don't have to even like me. But what you can do is let me help you come into your own." Minjun dropped his head, tried to look him in the eye. "Not everything has to change."

But it already has, thought Chan bitterly. Just thirty minutes ago, he'd had his whole life ahead of him- now, it didn't even have an end anymore. *What's even the point?*

Then, of all things, he remembered: Jay, who'd been drinking coffee, not blood. *Would that be an option for me?* Would he be able to retain some sense of normalcy? Maybe *not* be a complete monster?

"If I'm gonna live forever," Chan deigned, "I can probably live to hate you."

"I can earn your forgiveness." Minjun nodded back to the house.
"Come along, fledgling. You have a lot to learn."

"My name is *Chan*."

And thus, all the way up into '28, Chan became versed in the arts of vampirism 101- the basics of a simple life for an undead twentysomething. Every couple of days, he learned something new. Minjun even made Chan keep a *notebook*.

"I was turned year of '14," Minjun informed him. "If I'd had someone in the trenches to teach *me* how to properly vampire, I would've taken them up on it in seconds."

The living room was days were passed in lessons: blood, substitutes for it, when and when not to feed, moving safely among humans, resist urges, all the good stuff. Most days, he didn't even leave the house, and when he did, it was never for too long. He couldn't even talk normally to his neighbors anymore: what was small talk when you weren't even a person? How could he explain to Mr. Truman that no, his mother couldn't come to book club, she was away on vacation with their whole family and he just hadn't gotten the memo? Or Alice that sorry, he wasn't free on Saturday night because his roommate was going to be giving a lecture on blood types and their taste differences? Or the band that they were going to have to rehearse without him again, there was just a lot going on at home? He couldn't even smile at anyone anymore without worrying if they could see fangs.

At least Minjun kept him busy.

"So you're saying that I *don't* have to live on blood?" asked Chan incredulously.

"Not just blood," corrected Minjun. He'd laid out coffee grounds, tea bags, powdered drink mixes as examples. "It won't sustain you for as long, but you can get by a couple days at most with two or even just one cup of coffee."

"So can I just like. Do that instead? I already don't sleep- it could work."

"They're *substitutes*, Chan- they're meant to be temporary. Also- the hell do you mean, you don't sleep?"

"Insomniac writer things. It wouldn't be too different from how I already live."

"Chan, your body is technically dead. Heart not beating, blood not flowing. You need blood to sustain your physical form. I taught you about this for almost two full weeks."

"Come on, all it would do is make me pee more often!" Chan heard the words out of his mouth, considered them. "Wait, does blood make you pee like water?"

"Oh, my *God*."

Then it was onto shadow-travel, which was a little more complex.

"This is a more difficult skill to master," Minjun said, watching as Chan stuck his hand in and out of the shadow made by the lamp by the door. "But necessary all the same."

"When would I even need to use this? To freak someone out even *more*?"

"Even for immortals, the world is still dangerous. It could make for a useful resource when a fast escape is needed."

"And vampires can do this *why*?"

"Creatures of the night tend to find solace in the dark."

Chan wrinkled his nose. "That sounds so pretentious."

"*Focus*," Minjun snapped. "Just- slowly, step inside." Tentatively, Chan obeyed, hands out like a blind man as he stepped through the

space, gasped to breathe it in. "I know, I know. A little arresting."

"*What the fuck-*"

"Don't stick around too long- any more than a minute and you'll erode into the shadow realm forever."

"Why did you tell me that *after* I stepped inside? Now I'm nervous!"

"Just think of somewhere close by that you want to go. You'll see an opening in another shadow. Don't think- just go for it."

Chan took a deep breath, let it out, and pushed himself into a run yelling a battle cry that lasted about two seconds before he trip-crashlanded into the dining room table- right behind them. "How was that?"

"... for a first try, I'll take it."

Still, it took a little longer than just two full weeks to convince him to drink animal blood- the vial of 'cat extract' that Minjun kept in his breast pocket for emergencies -and even that was done in the middle of the night, like a kid sneaking in one last brownie before bed. What had freaked him out the most was how it *tasted*.

"Is *this* what umami's supposed to mean?" Chan had asked Minjun, who'd been crashing on the couch.

His teacher responded by patting his head. "Now you're getting it."

And maybe that was more than a little scary.

There were times when the whole thing hit just a little harder, doubled back and whacked him over the head leaving behind a plum-sized lump named reality. Like when he hopped the backyard fence and sprinted down the fence of the alley for what could have been miles and stopped at the brink of a forest just to place a hand over his heart and feel nothing, not even a tremor. Or when he walked past that new restaurant across from the theater and was

halfway through crossing the street when he remembered he would never get to try it. Or when he'd fed for the first time on the robber that had stolen into the house and broke down crying over his corpse, letting Minjun place a hand on his shoulder for comfort.

Sometimes Chan would lay awake at night not just because of the insomnia, gazing into the ceiling, running his tongue over the tips of the fangs that seemed to grow longer every night, still unable to believe they were his.

Minjun, because apparently vampires also had some sort of seventh parental sense, would stop by his door to check on him. "You alright?"

"It's like..." Chan trailed, picking apart the ceiling atom by atom with his eyes. "Puberty all over again. But worse."

Minjun chuckled, face detached. "Like you died, except you have to feel it."

Chan would only fully understand what he meant years later, but still, he replied, "Yeah. Like that." It was kind of the whole deal with being undead.

Though, when Minjun stumbled through the door with their latest blood supplicants, it definitely sounded like the tables had turned.

Chan had been brushing up on some shadow-travel tricks in the kitchen when he'd arrived. "Hey! So I've been working on a little something, and." He stuck his hand into the shadow made by the knife rack, and it emerged behind Minjun's shoulder from the silhouette of the coatrack. "Ta-da! Whaddaya say?"

"You need to get out of here."

"Are you evicting me out of my own *house*?"

"Not just your fucking house- LA, the entire country if you need to." Minjun dumped his groceries out on the dining table to run his hands through his meticulously styled hair. "They're fucking talking about you, all of them-"

"Who?" Chan pulled his hand out of the shadows, walked out to face him head on. "Who is?"

"The whole goddamn *neighborhood*. They think you killed your family!"

Chan's flood of questions dried in an instant, all other thought with it. "What?"

Minjun sighed another one of his disappointed father sighs. "Have you been talking to anyone?"

"Not- not really, no."

"Well, according to a guy with an extensive sweater collection and that flapper girl down the street, your family has taken a trip to Manhattan, are visiting family in Ohio, *and* booked The Stanley Hotel. In Colorado. *In the same three goddamn weeks.*"

"I *knew* I should've written a story down."

"Do you now understand why I've been keeping you away from people? Why I've been training you? You have to *blend in*, Chan. And you have to make it look good!"

"How do I do that? These people have known me forever! They know I wouldn't do anything like this!"

"If the public get wind of this, it won't be them you'll need to convince." Chan let one of the dining chairs kick his knees out from under him. "I'm sorry- I know you didn't mean for this to happen."

"I can't be a vampire *and* a felon!"

"Kid, I'm pretty sure we've come to the conclusion that anything can happen these days."

"What're we gonna do? Do you know anyone outside of LA?"

"Not we. Just you."

Minjun was looking at him like he was planning a flower arrangement for the funeral he would never have. "What about you?"

"Remember when I told you that my coven left me?" Shakily, Chan nodded. "They gave me a deadline to come back. Six months."

The pieces weren't too far apart. "It's been that long, huh?"

"Just about. Although I wasn't lying about the murder thing."

"Didn't think you would." Chan hoisted himself up on his feet. "So. Where do you suggest I go?"

"Anywhere outside the city- heard up west is good. It would probably be best to skip tonight." Chan drew in breath through his nose, nodded with resolution. "Maybe there'll be more for you out in the world."

"Maybe." Chan held out a hand for him to shake, to close the deal. "Tell Junho I said hi." They shook. "You called your guys a coven. What is that?"

"A group of monsters- doesn't have to be just vampires. There's a helluva lot more out there than you know. Hear any of our names, we're called 2PM."

"Sounds weird." *But cool.* "I'll remember you."

Junho left that day, leaving two thirds of the blood storage for him. Chan filled up two suitcases with spare clothes and books and records and whatever else he'd need. He waited until nightfall, touring every corner of the house and reliving the memories he'd

made and forgotten, grazing the baby pictures that lined the hallway and taking whatever could fit, played the demo record of Blue Orchids for the first and last time, listened as the melody filled up the whole house, praying that somehow, they would be able to hear it.

With the instrumental playing in his mind from the loudspeaker in the pit of his heart, Chan hailed the first cab he saw, loaded the trunk, and left without looking back.

It was San Francisco first- he crashed with a friend who'd moved out to own a record store. Three months of speakeasy friends, bartered records, and strolling the streets of Chinatown to be cornered almost every time by a white tourist and asked for directions, and it was back on the road with a toast to the Orpheum. It was like that pretty much everywhere he went- usually he'd simply been lucky enough to last that long before someone started asking questions about why he never touched any of the leftovers in the fridge, or what was in that second suitcase.

Each stop overflowed with enough memory to fill the canvas of a gold-framed mural: gin rummy with friendly roommates, roaring jazz in the French Quarter, masquerade balls in Harlem, helping friends hide gin under their beds in Chicago. In dark corners and disguised hatches and even broad daylight, he found monsters, POC's, people who were part of a community that didn't even have a proper name yet. There were moments that glittered so bright they were blinding, whiskey-warm and bubbling in his blood, that always made him wonder, *maybe this is where I'll stay.*

But those were always soured by the villains of the piece, the reminder that it couldn't always be good. There were people in the Asian crowd who didn't take kindly to the gays, gays who didn't take kindly to Asians, even monsters who liked to pick and choose- never one place where all of him could be accepted. It wasn't just three years of wanderlust and false murder charges. It was finding a place to start over, to lay down roots and *be.*

Maybe, he thought one night, on a cot in an apartment with bars on the windows, reading a 1932 headline of another work percentage dropping, *no one gets that choice*. Just settle for what resembled it the most. Everyone grew up wanting the world in the palm of their hands, wanting to shrink it down and remold it so that it would fit into their own little dream, whether or not they deserved to live it. *And maybe I don't either, and that's the point*. Perhaps he never had.

Well, fuck. He sure had some time to kill before settling on *that* dreary sentiment.

Flash to '33, and an hour long hitchhike from Salem to a quiet, verdant town by the very edge of Portland, where the old alicanto crone helped him out of her white Rolls Royce and winked a molten bronze eye as she left him by the weathered town sign, covered almost completely with crushed velvet rose vines*, painted in black and white and chips of umber brown, reading in neat periwinkle lettering: *Eldritch: Welcome to The Other Side*.

Walking around, the area looked normal enough, nice enough—definitely a lot nicer than how the rest of Portland was looking at the moment. People, regardless of skin color, were just walking about, shopping, generally getting along. An open market stocked up with produce and other goods. Judy Garland spilling out of an open window, where a slender man watered his green carnations*. Upon noticing Chan looking, he dropped a sly smile down below. (Chan might have walked into a streetlamp.)

He nudged his way into a mostly empty soda shop, ivy green awning reading Aisling* in champagne gold. Inside, couples and friends were chatting amicably over malt shakes and ice cream down the lengthy assembly line-esque bar on emerald leather seats. Behind it was the beefiest Irish man in an apron Chan had ever made no attempt to avoid. "You a newcomer?"

"Uh..." Chan forced his eyes to stop wandering around the place, tried for a chuckle. "Was it that obvious?"

"Aye." Not even a hint of hesitation. Had to respect him for that.
"Take a seat."

Setting his bags aside, he pulled up a chair. He hadn't even gotten fully situated before a milkshake glass filled to the brim with deep red liquid that Chan didn't even have to smell to look up at the man with raised eyebrows. "What is this?"

"Oh. Are you not a vampire?" The man waved a hand like, *don't sweat it*. Up close, his name tag read Ronan. "My apologies. Just assumed."

Chan promptly choked on the next breath he took. "*What?*"

"You *are* new." Ronan nodded down to one of the couples, a man and a woman bent innocently over a shared malt. "See those two? Faun and nymph- came here today to celebrate her transition."

"I..." *Didn't know either of those could be things people said comfortably in public*. "Wow. Um. Good for her. And them."

"Magic does make plenty of things easier." Ronan nodded back to Chan without missing a beat. "So, vampire. Yes or no?"

"Yeah. I-I mean, yes. I just- I've never really... announced it out loud before." The man nodded in understanding. "How did you know?"

Ronan bellowed with laughter so loud his ginger beard shook. "You're pale as the full moon on a black night, boyo. I was bound to guess."

Chan's opinion on that statement was a pendulum swinging between offended and weirdly pleased. He decided to drop it. "Well, I suppose you get points for getting it right on the first try."

"More than just points, newcomer." He flashed a wink. "It takes one to know one."

"Wait, are- are you *serious*?" Chan's voice lowered itself on instinct. "You're a vampire too?"

"Oh, plenty more than that. I am the *abhartach*."

He said it like it meant something big. "A... what?"

"Abhartach. Scaring the slacks off the kiddies since 1870." Ronan sighed fondly. "Good days. Tell me, has anyone put a brick in your mouth yet?"

"... no? But I was buried alive last year, and that wasn't fun."

"Happens to the best of us." The shop bell jingled. "Aye, Peniel! Got some new blood over here!"

"Because of course the poor bastard chose to come in here." A man in a dijon sports coat dropped cheerfully into the seat next to him, took off his fedora to reveal a bald head buzzed down to the scalp. "Tell me he hasn't been boring you to death with any of his haunting days tales. He can go on for *hours*."

"Pay no mind to him," said Ronan. "The boy just got here- poor, tired, looking for shelter."

Chan stammered a protest. "Oh, I- I mean, not this very *second*-"

"Don't worry about it!" Peniel's grin was genuine, the kindest thing he had seen in a long time. "I've got a motel a few blocks down the road. There's always room for newcomers."

"Because no one else ever comes," Ronan muttered.

Peniel reached over and swung at him with one of Chan's suitcases; he hadn't even seen him grab it. "It's a perfectly respectful establishment, he'll like it just fine." While Ronan laughed off his attack, Peniel turned back to Chan. "Say, since I've already got your bags, how about you tell me your name?"

Maybe this place won't be so bad. "Name's Chan."

The motel was five blocks ahead, nearly fully blocked off by the green and foliage that seemed to be everywhere in Portland. Cutting a hard right, they drove right through it, Chan watching the sun filter in through the leaves while Peniel rambled on about the struggles of dating as a kappa, because *no*, contrary to popular belief, he did *not* have a shell on his back at all times.

On its own, Levanter wasn't too flashy; simply gray stone, like it had grown from the pebbles in the earth, two rings of gray roof shingles separating two floors, crowded around the front with bushes of baby blue eyes.* Even the sign couldn't stop flickering letter by letter- Peniel didn't yet have the budget to fix it. But when Chan set his bags down in room 17 for the first time, he had never felt more at home in any other one of his travels.

He did what he always did whenever he was somewhere new: experienced it to the best of his ability, found every nook and burrow worth exploring, made connections. And every day, he went back to Levanter, where Peniel was either helping some new guest or calling up a friend on the phone. He was always willing to talk, fill Chan in on whatever he was curious about: the history of the town (founded by Salem witch trial runaways- women who actually were witches), the human to monster ratio (7:10), if that guy down the street with the green carnations was single (yes). The longer he stayed, the more he could picture an actual future for himself, something like a home.

Then, only a two weeks in, he came in to find Peniel kicking open the door with his bags packed. "Whoa. Hey, Pen, what's going on?"

"I'm out, is what's going on," announced Peniel happily, not slowing his stride. "Fucking off to Boston with my coven, BTOB. Did I not tell you?"

"No? Like, good for you, but no?" Chan jogged ahead to keep up. "Who's gonna manage the motel?"

"You are."

"Wha- me?"

"Yes, you! I've got a list of everything you need on the lobby desk. Don't worry, you'll do fine!"

"I've only been here two *weeks*, Peniel. I don't know the first thing about owning a motel!"

"Neither do I! But you'll learn- and you love doing that."

At the front of the entryway, a slightly rusty blue convertible was rumbling in impatience, packed with six other guys who matched Peniel's eager, effusive smile. Two took his bags into the trunk while another helped him into the car.

"I knew it the minute I took you in, Chan," Peniel confessed on the backseat of the car. "You looked at this place and saw something I never have. I think you can make something special out of Levanter, but only if you want to."

With a whoop of approval, the coven of BTOB was gone in a cloud of smoke down the road, the keys to Levanter thrown over the kappa's shoulder, caught by Chan.

When he could no longer see them, Chan turned to the motel, watched the sign flicker. *Something like a home*, he thought. "Huh."

Handling the new responsibility of Levanter was a lot easier than his brain had primarily made it out to be; Peniel had already filled out all the paperwork, which had somehow been done without Chan ever noticing. Was there something in that shiny, oracle head of his that saw something in Chan that Chan didn't even see in himself? Or had he just been looking for a way out of Eldritch? *Whatever the explanation, there's always been some kind of method to his madness.* The fact that he'd seen every facet of him and still trusted

him with an entire building was a comfort that he hadn't received in a good long while.

Easing in was also surprisingly painless given, as Ronan had said, not a lot of customers really came in. All there really was to the job was changing sheets, stocking supplies, and occasionally knocking on a door that had been closed for too long. Whatever trained eye spotted the building behind the trees only really stayed for a day or two, maybe three- any less than the one-week mark was temporary. Anything more was a more solid deal. "It was how I knew to trust you," Peniel would eventually tell him over the phone.

Anyhow, everything was all fine and dandy until the summer a girl nearly crashed into the entrance.

It happened maybe four months into the job- Chan heard it before he saw it: the vehement screech of car wheels skidding to a halt, like bear claws on a chalkboard. He'd thrown down the morning's newspaper to check out the scene.

A mint green Model SJ was parked in a still billowing cloud of dirt about forty-five degrees off the path, and the driver kicked open the door laughing. Her long pinup curls were blown loose by wind, looking like fire fanned across the shoulders of her checkered yellow knit top, which was tucked into a pleated pink skirt. "*Whooo!* That was a *rush!*" She noticed Chan gaping, switched into a smile. "Hi."

"Hi. What the fuck. Hi. Uh." He extended a hand to her, then the car, then the tiniest little distance it was from the flowers. "What was that?"

"Oh, I was seeing how fast I could break the speed limit without getting caught. From the looks of it, I haven't." Then she followed his gaze, caught up with why he might've been concerned. "Shit. I didn't crash into anything, did I?"

"Nope, nope, you're good." Finally, Chan remembered his job. "So! Are you looking for a room?"

"Yeah. I heard about here from a friend- said it was a good place for any monster to settle for a while."

"Oh! So you know Peniel?"

"Who?"

Huh. "No one. Forget it. Let's get you situated."

After pulling her three suitcases out of the trunk (and rightfully parking her car), he checked the girl, who revealed her name to be Sana, into room 6. Despite the list of location recommendations he left for everyone in the motel, she elected to stay in the courtyard: "In case there's cops behind me, I don't want to risk going outside." Chan asked if she was always this competitive, which lead to her telling him about the time she and maenad friend Miyeon went to see just how many jukeboxes they could steal from every bar in Nashville, which lead to him telling her how he met one Victoria Spivey, which lead to one thing and then another, until finally-

"So he just left this place to you after knowing you for two weeks?"

"Yup. Been at it for four months."

"Just kinda took it and ran with it, huh."

"Y'know, never heard it phrased like that, but yeah, I guess I did."

They sat next to each other in the courtyard, exactly one couch cushion apart, one with a glass of blood, the other with Cherry Coke, record spinning in the background.

"What's it like, owning a motel?"

Chan took a contemplative sip. "Kinda like having the kids my parents always wanted me to have, only they're all teenagers that either never leave their room or only do it when you're not around, and next thing you know they're off to college."

"Nice. Forgot you were human once for a second."

"Sometimes, I do too."

There was an awkward space for depth to elbow their way in, but, seeing as neither of them wanted to welcome it, Sana closed it off. "Ever wonder what it was like be born?"

"You just have all these questions stocked away, don't you."

"For the right situation, right time."

Chan allowed a laugh. "Jeez, okay. I don't know- would it really be much of a memory? It's kinda shitty- you're just a little potato, screaming at the light of the world. I mean, that's how it happened for me, you're like- what, again?"

"A faerie," Sana reminded. "And yeah, it was different. From what I know, it was a flower sprouting in the middle of the woods- tiger lily*, if you must know."

"Right, right, what else would it be."

"And, pretty much with that flower, *pop*. Out came me."

"And that was it?" She nodded. "And you just accept that? Don't you want to know the *science* behind it, or something?"

Sana raised a sardonic brow. "It's magic. There *is* no science. Did you really want to know the specifics of how *you* were born?"

"Touché." Her glass raised: *as I said*. "So, what're you actually doing out here? Other than almost totaling your car."

She rolled her eyes, giggling through it. "Honestly? I feel like I'm just trying to get away for a bit- or at least find my own. The cities are nice and all, and the noise is fun, but."

"Not all the time?"

"Yeah. Exactly." She tilted her head up, watched the clouds pass over the sky. "It's like it's quiet here, but you know you're not alone."

"Eldritch is good for that. It's just the kind of place where everything is okay."

"Everything?"

The lilt in her voice asked what the question did not. "Everything."

She considered that. "Hold on." Sana pointed across at his furrowed brows, drawing the dots. "You. You're not, like."

Her hand flapped between gestures, drew a straight line. Chan could get the gist. "What? Oh, God no." She breathed a sigh of relief. "It's more like a fifty-fifty kind of deal. 'Cause like on one hand, you have women-"

"Love women."

"Precisely, yes. And then, you have men-"

"Unfortunately, sometimes."

"-but not always. But yeah. You get it." She nodded, knowing smirk on her face. He breathed his own sigh of relief. "Man, it's great not to have *explain* it all the time."

"Is that what it's like here?"

"Yeah! I mean, sometimes, with guests that come from all over, there's a little more... input, but in Eldritch, you don't really have to explain anything. It just *is*." He swished his own glass, watched the red lap at the sides. "Maybe the motel really was a blessing in disguise."

"How so?"

"Back home, a lot of. Well, shit went down." Sana drank to that. "And it's sort of like I've been trying to find my way back ever since. Not there, but somewhere else." *And this was to get me to realize I might not have to keep looking.*

"Well, hey." The faerie toasted her glass to his, eyes like spring clovers. "Here's to hoping."

The very second the rims clinked the entry door banged open, and a new outsider came hurtling through the lobby in an explosive streak of fire, tumbling to a stop in the middle of the courtyard.

"Does that normally happen?" Sana asked, thoroughly amused.

"No, it does not," affirmed Chan. "Although I did leave that door open for precautionary purposes."

"Probably best."

They moved to help him up; behind debris, smudges of dirt, and one misplaced baby blue eye was a lanky frame in singed sport clothes, a mess of firecracker red hair on top, the sure mark of a salamander. Iron gray eyes met Chan's; the pupils were dilated, energetic, inhumanly sharp. He eagerly stuck out a hand to him. "Bambam's the name, and arson is my game."

"Nice tagline," mused Sana.

"Thanks!"

"I think that was sarcasm," noted Chan, whose suspicions were confirmed when she nodded. "However, it is nice to meet you."

"Then I take my thanks from her to you." He shook Chan's hand. "Anyway, whose place is this? Is it yours? I'm gonna go ahead and assume it's yours because you don't look like the kind of person who'd park their car in a bush—"

"I did not park my car in a *bush!*" Sana objected.

"Yeah, you kinda did," Chan told her. "But we're past that. Now, as the manager of this establishment, I assume you'll want a room?"

"Damn right! Wait." Bambam dropped Chan's hand, cocked an ear to listen to the music. "Is that Billie Holiday?" Carefully, the vampire nodded. "Damn, you got *taste!* Speaking of which, will it be a problem that I don't have anything except four cats?"

"Please don't put him on the same floor as me," Sana pleaded.

Chan got the notion that he wasn't about to get another quiet morning for a long time. *And I don't think I'll mind.*

After discovering Bambam had crashed his car into a tree ("Worse than a bush," Sana chimed.) and unlocked the passengers seats to get his cats out safe (they ended up having to comb the forest and talk one out of a tree), Chan ended up giving him the upstairs key to room 19 just so he would have somewhere to put them.

"Do your couches pull out into beds?" questioned Bambam. "Asking for my cats, not me."

And thus was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Sana and Bambam were only the beginning: one by one, through some different kind of fiasco, they all showed up. Come year '34, and Bambam, thinking it was the delivery guy, opened the door to find a severely lost Brian, dusty red hair blasted every which way by the wind; he'd been on his way to hike Tillamook Head when a storm changed his direction. What was supposed to be a few nights' shelter ended up being a new appreciation for crooners ("Bing Crosby isn't shit, but Nat King Cole is more than just your Christmas album," Brian quoted.), a fourth person to open the door, and an inhabitant of room 11.

Then to say nothing of Jamie's remarkable arrival; the gang had simply been chilling as the sun was going down, Bambam playing with his cats as to be sure they wouldn't have the energy to slit throats in the night, Chan finishing up his winter reading on the roof, Sana lying on the floor jamming quietly next to the pile of records she'd cued up, Brian bringing a pitcher of Rosemary lemonade when he looked up into the sky.

"Is that a shooting star?"

Half asleep, Sana murmured, "How lovely. It's not even nighttime yet."

"Is it just me, or does it sound like it's screaming?" Bambam asked.

Chan looked up from Murder on the Orient Express, eyes widening as they began to make out a humanoid figure plummeting out of the darkening sky. "I don't think that's a star."

The sounds of her screams made it past the music, and all four of them came scrambling down from their places and into the backyard, where the aviator crashed and rolled and tumbled down the hill until they stopped halfway, wrapped in copper colored wings. Brian and Chan unfolded them to find the girl inside, brown and rouge fingerwaves brushed and blown out of proportion, her culotte shorts and button-up now soiled with grass and dirt.

"Fucking rednecks," she cursed. "And their... fucking... shooty... *crossbows*."

Bambam, ever charismatic, chose to welcome her with a smile. "Good morning, starshine. The earth says hello."

"What is the *matter* with you?" Sana asked him, genuinely concerned.

"It's not even nighttime," complained Brian.

This made the harpy on the ground even more dismayed. "What the hell is this?"

"Fuck it. Welcome to Levanter." Chan helped her up and inside. Two hours and one backstory from a very affronted Jamie, and she opted for room 29 before he even handed her the key.

It was impossible to tell how all of them became so at home. What was meant to be just a resting stop for bigger travels became the place they passed their time at when there was no energy to spend outside, the place they went back to when the sun was setting after a long day, the place they dared to call home. In the main room fridge, snacks and comfort food and leftover takeout crowded the space with his blood bottles. Five pairs of shoes at the door of the entryway, five ways to split the bill, five doors to open when someone needed to talk or just didn't feel like being alone. All the parts to a family Chan never thought he would have again, four new portraits to paint over his heart, inked in the tissue, in the blood.

That's what I've been looking for, Chan realized, one peaceful night of stargazing, everyone having thrown their quilts on the roof to watch the sky bloom in sparkling shatterings of light. *A family.*

It was autumn of 1936 when Merry And The Witch's Flower opened in Eldritch- when Yerin moved in.

The days passed by as the normally would- it wasn't even noticeable at first. Every once in a while, Jamie would announce she was going out to town, and they'd bid her goodbye, hardly even glancing up from their own activities. Hours later, she'd return as if she'd walked out of a dream, still seeing the world for something better than it was, footsteps barely touching the ground like she was on the moon. When Brian asked how her day had been, she skipped through the mechanics of a proper insult and went a simple, cutting 'shut up.' Being it was Jamie, it wasn't questioned.

But then they started to notice how, despite the numerous days at a time she'd go out, she never came back with anything. When it was her turn to make dinner, she'd be smiling through the steps for no reason. To say nothing of the look on her face whenever that one Doris Day song came on- that on it's own deserved an intervention.

On the fifth week before she left, Bambam waylaid her right with, "Alright, who is it?"

Jamie jumped like he'd burned her (happened before). "What d'you mean?"

"You've been drifting around, smiling nonstop for *weeks*," said Brian. "Not at us, obviously, but we can tell it's for someone."

"Also you smell like mothballs," pointed out Sana. "So either you've been going somewhere very old or you've found the exclusive asshole that still owes me five bucks."

"Mothman was a once in a lifetime customer, Sana," Chan said. "But I agree. Have you been going to that new antique that opened up?"

"Holy shit, she's blushing, she has!" Bambam squealed.

Jamie slugged his shoulder, scowling fiercely. "If I show you why, will you leave me alone?"

"Yes," they trilled, with the kind of voices that kept their fingers crossed behind their backs. For Jamie, that was close enough.

She marched her buzzing roommates three blocks up the street, stopping them just behind the display window. "Look inside- damn it, not *that* far. Just *look*."

A girl in a dark pastel floral dress leaned over the counter, absently tucking her river of side part waves behind her ear with her nose in a book. She was beautiful- delicately, unearthly so, but Jamie was

looking at her like she'd just descended from a crystalline bubble in the sky.

"Her name's Yerin," the harpy whispered. "She's a sylph, been in town for almost two months now, the only music she plays in her store is stuff by female artists, and the things she has in her store is stuff that she collected herself." She touched her temple to the glass in distress. "I've been stopping by for weeks, and she still has no idea I like her."

"Maybe try asking her out, then?" suggested Sana. "You never know until you try."

"Have you actually talked to her?" mused Brian. "That part was a little unclear to me."

"Yes, I've *talked* to her," Jamie seethed. "I just don't know if, y'know, she even likes girls, or if she'd be weirded out, or *anything*."

"Well, with a girl like that, she's probably got a whole shitload of suitors lined up around the block," Bambam pointed out. "So you better at least shoot your shot."

"Oh! Here's an idea." Chan pointed from Jamie to Yerin. "*You* can invite her over for dinner tonight. A couple months in of being the new girl, she'll probably want to make some friends. That way we can meet her and you can get closer. If she's really comfortable with you, then she won't say no."

"Well, I guess I can *try*," grumbled Jamie reluctantly.

"Thattagirl," cheered on Brian.

"Take these with you." Sana gave her a neat little bouquet of pink carnations* that she'd sprouted from a crack in the pavement. "They'll work like a charm."

"Fuck you," Jamie hissed, but took the bouquet. "Any one of you says a word, you die."

"Good luck~" Chan singsonged.

Rolling her eyes, she rushed inside, crushing the stems of the flowers in a rock solid fist while the rest of them pretended not to watch the whole interaction.

"No, shut up, look at how she just looked up from her book to look at her, *look*," Bambam gushed.

"I've never seen Jamie so nervous," Brian snickered.

"Just look at them laugh- *both* of them." Sana shook her head.
"They're down for the count."

"Goners," Chan echoed.

Five minutes later, Jamie came back out empty handed, face flushed and winded.

"I'll take it she liked the flowers?" Brian snarked.

"Shove it, Brian," Sana told him. "What'd Yerin say?"

"She, um, she said yes," Jamie managed, regaining her power of speech word by word. "When she took the flowers, she- she pulled me in and said, 'Tell your friends to stop by the shop too.'"

Bambam doubled over cackling. "Oh, man, I like her."

"Good job, champ- you made it happen." Chan put an arm around her shoulders and steered her back towards the motel. "Let's get ready for phase two."

'Phase two,' as Chan had called it, went excellently- somehow, through an odd mix of vegetarian Mulligan stew, dandelion salad, and Yerin saving the night by bringing a pineapple upside down

cake, the night ended with a new shared love for Ma Rainey and Jamie breathlessly shutting the door behind her with a candy red lipstick mark on her cheek and a phone number from what was supposed to be just a simple goodnight, not even able to silence their cheers.

From that day forward, all five of them became regulars at Yerin's, stopping for records and herbs and even the occasional rumor ("I keep my windows this clean for a reason," Yerin, on being asked how she knew Milton was seeing Henry at the same time as Clair), none as much as Jamie, of course, who came over with shipments of moon milk and music recommendations and kisses to lift her spirits after a slow day. She started staying over more and more, days to weeks until, two months after calling the sylph her girlfriend for the first time, Jamie moved all her things into the apartment above the store, leaving room 29's room key on the reception desk.

"Man," Brian murmured. "I never thought I'd miss getting yelled at."

"It's not like we'll never see her again," Chan amended. "Just... less."

Then, less than a year later, Chan came across one tall rain-soaked poltergeist who introduced himself chatteringly as Yugyeom during a storm, in dire need of dry clothes and shelter. In the vampire's defense, he did the natural thing.

"You can take any room you want- though I recommend 24 because it just got vacuumed," Chan told him, slapping the key into his hand. "The girl by the pantry's Sana, the guy with the guitar's our local venti Brian, and on the couch is Bambam. Being a salamander, he's kind of a heat generator this time of year."

Yugyeom hadn't even heard him. Bambam, laughing on the couch with his date of the month, looked away from her for a second- and *only* a second -to meet his eyes, doing the slightest of double takes as he held them.

Yugyeom's trench coat still dripping on the floor, he murmured, "Uh-huh."

Bambam's ears started to steam. "I'm gonna have to call you back," he said to the girl.

Chan backed off, watching the poltergeist make the first move. "What did I *do*?"

"What else were you expecting? You saw how he looked at Humphrey Bogart in San Quentin." Sana swung down from the top floor by bougainvillea vine. "I, for one, am excited to see how this plays out."

The process didn't even take long, given Bambam practically dumped the girl on the spot (Chan had the room key to 10 thrown in his face as she stormed out). The two became fast, flirty friends, swapping stories on past crime heists and travels and exes, finishing jokes and sentences in a frequency that was more nauseating than adorable. They all got along with Yugyeom just fine- he was funny, entertaining, and agreed that Hitchcock needed to use more varieties of women than just blonds in his films. But he must've been truly invested to learn the favorite toys of all Bambam's cats- Chan figured out as much when he knocked on the door to 19 one Tuesday morning because King had gotten into the pantry again and had it answered by a half dressed Yugyeom.

"You should really invest in a 'Do Not Disturb' sign," Brian offered. "Maybe multiple."

Come to find out that, five months later, Yugyeom had been led astray from a job he'd been doing for his coven, Got7, which resided on an island off the coast of Louisiana. Packing a vacation bag, Bambam took a grand total of three trips over there- and on the third, he took his cats with him and wrote that he was staying for good.

"Well, I guess that's how it played out," muttered Sana.

"Eldritch doesn't really have a lot of beaches," Brian mediated.

"I just hope it doesn't end up a mistake," said Chan.

And, given Bambam didn't stay throughout the holidays, it wasn't. The next year passed by like a week in the time it took for Sana to burst through the door and announce: "I met a girl at a coffee shop!"

"Oop," peeped Brian.

Chan looked up from balancing the books. "Hold on- you met a girl at a coffee shop, or you *met* a *girl* at a coffee shop?"

Sana beamed with pride. "I *met* a *girl* at a coffee shop."

"Well then *shit*- regale us. Tell us what happened."

Brian joined them at the lobby desk crunching on Corn Nuts from the vending machine.

"I was standing in line, and she walked in- I swear, I thought I swallowed one of the moths that are always flying around in there. She had the prettiest ash blue hair, and her eyes smiled with her mouth, and-" Chan motioned for her to pick up the pace. "And then she ordered that lavender latte with almond milk, so I thought, 'hey, now or never,' the shot was shot, and I'm seeing her on Friday."

Brian whooped through a mouthful, and Chan applauded. "We should really learn from you when it comes to stuff like this."

"Sorry, I don't teach classes."

"I'm surprised you're not hyping this up more," piped Brian. "She could be the girl of your dreams."

"I don't want to think like that. I mean, I don't *know* if she's the girl of my dreams."

Cut to two days later:

Sana slammed the door behind her and strode for the couch. "She's the girl of my dreams."

"Called it," said Brian, and Chan snapped his book shut to follow her.

The faerie was sprawled horizontally across the couch, already babbling away. "... and I've met a lot of oreads but it's like she *genuinely* cares about the environment and hates Mount Rushmore, like she literally sent a flock of pigeons to go shit on George Washington's nose, have you ever *heard* of anything so romantic, and she wore the flower crown I made her all the way through, and-"

"Jeez, you won't stop talking about her, but we don't even know this girl's name," Chan mentioned.

"It's Dahyun. Doesn't it *sound* beautiful? I mean, she so really is, and she's caring and funny- and she laughed at *all* the jokes I made!"

"You sure those weren't just pity laughs?" sniped Brian. Sana sent up a Boston ivy from the ground to slap him in the arm.

"She sounds wonderful," Chan told her earnestly. "I'm happy for you, Sana."

"I'm happy for me, too. Fuck, that feels *weird*."

The first thing Dahyun when she came over was comment on the motel craftsmanship ("As if brought up by Mother Earth herself."), the second being argue with Brian over the best restaurant in town, Brian's argument being how could you possibly know, you're only here to study the habitat for a summer, Dahyun's being how could you possibly know, you have no taste. Sana smiled as she watched them go at it, and Chan smiled as the oread picked The Boswell Sisters out of their record collection. She would come back every so often, dropping off the shirts that Sana would leave at her place, the occasional Portland native flower with it.

Just a nice three months after the couple said 'I love you' for the first time, Sana casually dropped the info at dinner that she was thinking of hopping back in the car for an indefinite road trip throughout all the wildernesses she could find and asking Dahyun to come with. Weeks later, and they were helping them load their bags into the backseat of Sana's Model SJ and waving a handkerchief as they drove away, Boswell Sisters blaring.

"I wonder if this is a sign from the universe that we should watch out, or something," Brian said. "Like either we're gonna die or fall so in love we might as well have."

"Don't see how bad that could be," Chan replied. "Maybe you'll find yours one day."

"Chan, I think we both know I would sooner raid a politician's fridge than fall in love."

But when Brian returned from one particular date with a storm cloud brewing over his head, Chan knew his head hadn't been involved in the matter. "Bad?"

"No, great- which is worse." Brian hung his jacket on the coat rack, slunk out of the lobby. "I thought things were going well, and then he 'went to the bathroom' and didn't come back. Ditched right in the middle."

"That sucks. I'm sorry." Chan followed him out. "Wasn't this like, the third time you guys've seen each other?"

"Yeah. Guess he was sick of me." Grabbing a blanket from the storage room, Brian flung it over his shoulders so it fanned out like a cape. "I'm gonna go eat the rest of that ice cream left in the fridge to cover my sorrows. Cool?"

"Cool."

Gloomily, Brian disappeared into the main room. Chan prepared to follow - to comfort him and make sure he didn't have a sugar crash - when he heard wings flapping in the air. He looked up, wondering if God had finally sent an angel to collect his long overdue soul, when he saw the streaks of flame sparking off of blazing orange feathers, and he dove out of the way as the phoenix descended to the earth.

In human form, the faintly birdlike man wore a dark gray tweed suit, whatever product put in his feathery brown-blond hair destroyed by high altitudes. There was a small plastic container in his hand. Chan kept a careful distance. "Can I, uh. Help you?"

His gaze flitted around anxiously, desperately. "Do- Does a Brian live here?"

"Jae."

Brian himself had appeared in the doorway of the main room, blanket slipping around his shoulders, a tub of rocky road in one hand, a spoon falling from another. To anyone he looked like a wreck, but Jae's eyes filled with emotion. "Brian. You- you left."

"You were supposedly in the bathroom for twenty minutes."

Chan stepped aside out of involvement range.

"And I have an explanation for that," said Jae quickly. "I was actually was going to the bathroom, I swear- I mean, come on, I had almost two glasses of wine. And I told you that I used to go there a lot, right? Right. Well, what I didn't say was that I got kinda banned by one of the cooks because he caught me by the kitchens with his girlfriend and told me not to come back. But what *he* didn't know was that her and I were just bros and she just wanted my opinion on a dessert she was pitching to the head chef- a fucking cool spin on the strawberry icebox pie. You left before you could have your slice, so I brought it to you." He handed the container out to Brian, who set the ice cream on the couch and accepted it like even the plastic was precious. "I was done in like, five minutes, but on my way out he

pulled me over with the whole 'I thought I told you not to come back here' talk and I burned a hole in his apron when I punched him and I came back to find you gone. So I went out and asked around to see who knew where you went, and I bumped into this sylph who said you lived in a motel down the road, so I came here to plead my case, and now the case is pleaded. Pled. You get it."

Chan's jaw had dropped behind him. Brian looked like he was melting. "I do now."

"Good. Honestly, I'm sorry about the whole thing- I didn't know he'd still be there, I just kinda hoped he wouldn't? Also the food there's really good, and I know you're a fan of that stuff, so. Yeah."

Chan took advantage of being out of Jae's line of sight: he pointed two fingers at him and whisper-yelled: *CLAIM HIM*. Brian ignored him with incredible willpower. "Thanks- and. You're fine. It wasn't your fault." He scrutinized the top of the box, at the chicken scratch on top of it. "Did you write something on this?"

"Yeah. My address."

Brian choked on thin air. "Y-Your address?"

"For next time." Jae's nervousness shifted into hope. "If you want."

Chan was screaming silently in the background. Brian was sweating with the ice cream on the grass, blanket falling to the ground. "Yeah. I-I want."

"Good. Cool, uh. How about Sunday?"

"Yeah. Sunday's good."

"Good. Nice." Jae stepped back, smiling breathlessly. "Bye."

Wings spreading out behind him, he shot up into the air, a spray of feathers like sparks trailing behind, and soared away.

Immediately, Brian sighed with his whole chest, and Chan broke down laughing.

"Fucking *next time*," Chan wheezed. "Man, you scored."

"He brought me dessert *and* apologized," Brian hummed. "Officially redeemed."

"You are gonna make him cook for you, right?"

"What do you even take me for?"

Following his redemption, Jae proceeded to bring something new from every restaurant in town for Brian to enjoy- navy bean soup, latkes, even blood samples for Chan, though it was unclear if he bought them at the butcher's or found some other illegal method. Being a musician as well as a phoenix, he would occasionally play one of his band's songs for them- Day6, they were called, also being a coven; they were trying a new electric and acoustic take on big band. Sometimes, when Brian learned the chords, they would even play together; Chan thought the blend of their voices was reminiscent of the chemistry they had together. Certainly neither seemed to disagree.

So when Jae asked Brian seven months in if he would take up a position as the bassist of the band and member of the coven, the venti couldn't find it in him to refuse.

"Are you're okay with me doing this?" Brian asked for the millionth time, the night before he was leaving for upstate New York with Jae. "If you're not, I can tell him no."

"I'd never forgive myself for keeping you from doing what makes you happy. If I'm what's holding you back, Bri, you have my permission," Chan swore. "I'll be fine. I promise." And so he sent him off with a smile that promised him so.

Yet, every time he got back from a visit at Merry And The Witch's Flower, sent that letter in to Bambam, got off the phone with Sana or Brian, he was reminded that all he had left of them were pictures. Memories. Moments engraved in the gallery of his heart that he visited every time a song played. That after every guest left, Chan was alone again.

"Imagination is funny,"

"It makes a bee think of honey,"

One night, 1938, with that song playing in the mainroom while the rain thundered down, and Chan missing both his families more than ever, he managed to pick up on the sound of scratching at the door- too quick and small and frantic to be any threat.

Skirting around the courtyard, he slipped into the lobby, unlocked the entry with fumbling hands, and threw open the door.

And stopped.

The dog was tiny- just a pup, really, brown and white mottled fur soaked to the skin, whining in shaky breaths, shivering in every bone in their body. *Helpless.*

Chan's heart broke. "Hey," he whispered, crouching to let her inside, sniff his arms and hands. "What're you doing out there, huh? How'd you get all alone?"

Of course, she didn't answer, but he already knew: *the same as I did.*

Gently as he could, Chan scooped her up, held her to his chest, a being even more fragile and abandoned than he was. "Come on," he murmured. "It's too cold for you here."

Sweater Weather - The Neighbourhood

*Dark red rose: ready for commitment, passion.

*Green carnations: wealth, prosperity, homosexuality (often male).

*Baby blue eyes: sensitivity, innocence, and trust.

*Tiger lily: positivity and pride.

*Pink carnations: gratitude, I'll never forget you.

Bougainvillea: passion of the Victorians.

*btw aisling in Irish means dream or vision!

After School

Chapter 12: After School

After a lovely bit of Chanathan backstory, we return to the present for some coven-to-coven Vibe Time.

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I'm so good with you...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It was only out of the kindness of their hearts that Twice allowed Stray Kids to stay in the guest rooms upstairs, which also happened to be right across from them.

Three days later, it became clear that maybe wasn't the best idea.

"An ice cube melted on the ground and now my sock is wet," announced Chaeyoung with all the loudness in her voice. "Who the fuck wants to *die*?"

"When the mind runs too hot for the body, 'tis the crunchity munchity of nature's cold, edible glass that helps cool it down," replied Jeongin. "Also I didn't know I dropped anything."

"I might've been dreaming, but I think someone quoted The Princess Bride," yawned Tzuyu, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "Very badly."

"Oh, that was me," said Felix, raising his hand. "It's a thing that happens in my sleep sometimes. What did I say?"

"My name is Inigo Crayola. You killed me paps- be impaled."

"Sounds about right."

Dahyun and Seungmin stood at the impasse, both with dark crescents under their eyes. "Couldn't sleep either?" she asked. He nodded. "What's your reason?"

"The looming possibility of my death. You?"

"Watched Spirited Away at three am. I couldn't stop thinking about Yubaba flying through my window and snatching me out of my bed."

"... Valid."

Chan, Minho, and Jihyo hung back by the stairs, watching the covens clash. Chan started on the sign of the cross over his chest, but Minho stopped him halfway.

"That won't be able to save any of us."

"Don't worry," Jihyo promised. "I got this."

She wordlessly slammed the pommel of her sword - which had magically materialized in her hand - against the wall, so hard the chandelier swayed a little. The turf wars stopped fast. "Quit arguing and get downstairs," the valkyrie ordered. Not wanting to test her wrath any further, they all obeyed.

"So I just need a sword," Chan concluded. "Got it."

Thankfully, the chatter was a little more tame once they raided the enormous pantry of what would be a suitable breakfast for seventeen weird queer monsters with varying tastes. They sat on each side of the dining table in a room which, in all its decadent cobblestone, polished wood, and well-placed candelabras, looked decidedly like an area where 1700-era Prussian ghouls went to wine and dine, the talk blended together, divided into completely uneven groups of utter madness.

“Mr. Peabody and Sherman was the ultimate adoption allegory, and no being human or otherwise can convince me it’s not,” said Nayeon through a mouthful of blueberry yogurt.

“Ms. Grunion literally does try to take Sherman to child protective services throughout the whole movie because his dad’s a dog, which is actually eerily similar to people shitting on gay parents raising a child better than any man and woman just because they’re gay,” Jeongyeon joined, adding in a pinch of logic.

“Mr. Peabody is a gay neurodivergent dog,” Hyunjin echoed, putting two and two together, hands over his temples. “This makes so much fucking sense.”

Over one of four silver candelabras, regardless as what it was a response to, Jisung shouted, “Excuse me, I am *great* bisexual representation. Anyone who disagrees can die.”

“Oh, you guys didn’t even know MinChan at their finest,” Momo laughed at an enraptured ChangLix. “They couldn’t *stand* each other.”

“Which ultimately added to the overload of sexual tension,” said Sana over a thumbs-up.

“Minho and Chan?” Changbin repeated in disbelief.

“You mean the textbook definition of ‘those two. In a fight, they’re lethal. Around each other, they melt.’?” added Felix.

"It took them a while to get that far," said Momo. "Even to admit they liked each other."

"They probably would've never even spoken if it wasn't for us," Sana proclaimed proudly.

Changbin and Felix gawked, looked at a thriving MinChan, looked at each other.

"Well, don't leave us in *suspense*."

"We need the proper background on this."

"Come on, we weren't *that* bad," Chan argued- of course, he managed to hear them from the farthest right imaginable.

"We just had." Minho trailed in the middle of backing him up. "Certain disagreements about certain things."

"Which was summed up in you complaining about Chan's dimples for two weeks," Momo jabbed back.

"And Minho's smirk," added Sana.

That was the end of the rope for ChangLix. "*Background!*"

After background was given and Minho and Chan reassured each other that they they loved the latter's facial tics ever so much, mealtime was adjourned leaving everyone free to fuck off and do what they wanted. Taking advantage of some outside world contact most of them broke off into their own little duo factions to wander around the mansion. For example, Hyunjin, in the midst of a discourse about the forgotten badassery of the East German punk scene, had been left with Nayeon, who seemed comfortably unfazed.

"The energy was a bit too dreary for anything yesterday," Hyunjin mused. "Maybe now you'll be able to give me a proper tour."

"Proper tour, huh?" Nayeon hummed, furrowed her brows. "Shit, where to begin." Her face brightened, and she looked back up at him with building excitement. "You wanna see something cool *and* scary?"

"Now that I'm both suspicious and intrigued, sure."

Nayeon led him down the hall to the left of the dining room, stopping three rooms down at what looked like a door to a rubber room. Hyunjin's brain ran rapidly through a 3D View-Master reel of how to escape a straitjacket, but there was no hostility behind her smile, just open invitation. *Not like I have anything else to do right now- why not take it?*

Inside, the walls were indeed white, but not padded- in fact, there was not outline that suggested there could be an end to them, or if there even was. The material could have been any kind of glass or ice or stone. Maybe it was possible they had somehow transported into a cloud.

"What is this place?" Hyunjin's voice took up the entire room, like he was speaking into a microphone with speakers on every corner; he imagined it ringing in halos on the walls that rippled to the end.

"The most interesting and inexplicable place in the entirety of Hell In Heaven." Nayeon spread out her arms, as if for a hug. "Welcome, to *The Void*."

The name fit the room perfectly. "Was this there when you *got* here, because I don't know how even magic could construct a room like this."

"There when we got here- no idea where it's from, or what it was used for. The old tenants were kind of shut-ins. But, given it's got great acoustics *and* it's virtually soundproof, we decided to keep it around."

"Is it multipurpose, or do you guys just throw any wayward trespassers in-" Hyunjin caught up with the rest of the sentence. "Wait. *Completely* soundproof?"

Nayeon nodded, grinning demonically. "Completely. We've tried everything- Chaeyoung and Dahyun brought in six of the biggest tower speakers they could find and blasted Heads Will Roll at top volume. *Nothing*. Jeongyeon blasted an entire boulder in half with one bolt of lightning. *Nothing*."

"Wha- *how*-"

"Don't question it."

"So you've confirmed that The Void is soundproof *and* indestructible."

"Yup. It'll be our fallout shelter if anything happens to the mansion. For now, though, we mostly just use it for whatever- venting, late night jamming, karaoke, even the occasional prisoner. We got the idea when Tzuyu dragged in a stag wearing Greek buskins*- apparently he'd seen her shedding her skin in the woods." Hyunjin pulled a face so revolted he couldn't even imagine how it looked on him. "Lamia business. Happens every few months. Yappy fuck, but with him in The Void, we couldn't hear a sound."

"Damn. You solitary'd him?"

"Mina gave him food and water- she's decent. But when we brought him out, he held his tongue."

"Huh." Hyunjin stared up at the ceiling, trying to make out a focus point. "So I could softball underhand an entire grand piano in here and no one would hear it?"

"Nope."

"I could hold a private early Fourth of July celebration and- *nothing*?"

"Not even a spark."

"Goddamn." Hyunjin listened to the curse reverberate, remembered what Nayeon said about jam sessions. "So, theoretically speaking, I could scream out the lyrics to whatever song's been stuck in my head for the past three days now."

"That would be in your capabilities. Theoretically speaking." Her eyebrow arched like, *unless*. "Or literally."

His mind had already started in on the intro of the lone electric guitar. *"Coming out of my cage, and I've been doing just fine-"**

Nayeon's eyes flared wide, and she pointed. *"Gotta gotta be down, because I want it all,"*

"It started out with a kiss, how did it end up like this?"

"It was only a kiss, it was only a kiss."

And right then and there, they were jamming- jumping and dancing and screaming like they were The Killers themselves, like they were at a concert instead of some insulted sliver of a dimension where no outside distractions could touch them. It was too late to think about how probably, definitely insane they looked on the outside, not when they were already halfway through the first verse, not while he was having a smoke, and she was taking a drag.

"Now they're going to bed, and my stomach is sick,"

"And it's all in my head, but she's touching his chest,"

Now, they couldn't help laughing to *"she takes off her dress, now,"* and let it go.

"And I just can't look, it's killing me,"

Hyunjin took that brief moment of prechorus bliss to think of how the singer never said who he was angry at- the man or the woman -and

then they were taking control.

"Jealousy, turning snakes into the sea,"

Through his own voice, he could hear Nayeon's- definitely not what he'd expected. Energetic and spirited, definitely, but she wasn't just singing. There was a power to it, an almost aggressive, punk-rock undertone that was projected from the pit of her diaphragm, some special place in her soul, like when he sang, but with ferocity. A *banshee*, Hyunjin realized. Of course.

"But it's just the price I pay, destiny is calling me,"

"Open up my eager eyes, 'cause I'm Mr. Brightside,"

Because a jam could not be ended so easily, up next Nayeon led with Rebel Girl*, tearing through lyrics that Hyunjin found himself happy to be a background to, followed by Move Along* which involved an improv dance number which would have been impressive if they were drunk instead of sober and high as balls on the drug of life.

Multiple songs later, they were sitting back to back, voices hoarse, danced out.

"Damn," Hyunjin said into the ceiling. "Some of those I haven't heard in a while."

"You're not bad for a siren," Nayeon snarked.

"Says fucking you. How the hell did you know so many songs?"

"Well, when you and your friends decide to join the craze and make a rock band in the 70's, you learn on the job."

Hyunjin whipped his head around. "Get the fuck out." Nayeon giggled, loopy and ragged. "Seriously? What was the band?"

"6mix. It was how I met Jeongyeon- and Jihyo. And Sana. And two other girls, Minyoung and Lena. Don't know what they're doing these days, but you know the rest."

"Man, everyone was going crazy in the 70's."

"Damn right. We actually drew a decent crowd- still got some cassettes if you want to hear. You should've seen us in Berlin, though. We were there when the wall broke down."

"Sounds like a good way to spend a decade." If Hyunjin looked hard enough at the ceiling, he could pretend what he couldn't see was clouds. "You used your voice to your advantage."

A scoff he felt through his back. "Kinda the least you can do, as a vocal monster. Otherwise everyone just thinks you're all bark and no bite."

"Oh my God, right? It's not because we want to break your eardrums or seduce you- we just want to live. Have fun. Cause chaos. *That* kind of jazz."

"Live for the chaos," Nayeon intoned.

Hyunjin smiled. Somewhere in the oblivion, he'd spotted a bullfrog. *Fuck yeah.* "Live for the chaos."

Ding!

The bell sounded, and they lunged, demon versus empousa, fire and shadow streaking across the measured space to land the first blow.

Chaeyoung had taken their tour to the ride side of the master staircase, and once he'd found out there was a sparring ring- well. That was it for both of them. After almost two whole weeks of missing every body part day imaginable at the gym, it was more than

refreshing to have someone as spirited as Chaeyoung to spar against.

"Nice place you got here," he said mid-dodge, returning with a cross.

"Used to be a gladiator ring." Chaeyoung shoulder-rolled, shifted her stance to the left. "Where captives would fight to the death." Cross, hook, cross. "Those jiangshi were spicy."

Changbin laughed. "Never thought I'd hear that word to describe one."

"Never thought I'd use it, but here we are."

Fully transformed, she was a force to be reckoned with. It was enough that her arms were literally on fire fist to elbow- maybe it was possible that the goat legs gave her better stability. *Does the iron one make her a quarter cyborg?*

A streak of a blazing jab seared way too close to his face. Probably best to circle back to that after the match.

"You do this often?" Chaeyoung took a punch in her guard, met with be just as quick. "For someone who managed to take out two bruisers from a motorcycle coven and a dark elf assassin, you seem a little rusty."

"Well, shit, Chae." He blocked a hook with a raised forearm, jumped back from a sidekick, came back with a hit of his own. "Not everyone has a boxing ring in their east wing."

Chaeyoung grunted from an elbow cross. "Touché."

Even though the occasional rippers seemed to come out every five seconds, they didn't talk *that* often. There wasn't time on the clock that allowed them- and that was the best part. Everything else just narrowed down to the opponent in front of them, a mantra of movement calculating any possible hit that could get you closer to

victory, a rush of blood, a duck and strike, going and going until even the bruises felt good.

Ding!

The bell sounding the end of the match pealed, and they stumbled apart, contentedly exhausted.

"Man, I needed that," Chaeyoung sighed heartily. She'd morphed back into human form. "Did I burn you any?"

"Barely first degree." Changbin stretched his arm over his chest. "How about you?"

She examined her forearm- a light purple bruise looked to have been dusted with ash. "Something's a little off about this one here." But Chaeyoung smiled. "It'll heal."

"Once you get Mina to fix it?"

"It's how I'm still alive." She tapped his shoulder with the knuckle of her fist. "You're a good sparring buddy."

"So you were kidding about me being rusty?"

"Only because you seem like the kind of being who's easily riled."

"I am *not* easily-" Her smile was already growing in smugness. "Fuck you."

"Call it a draw?"

"Only in exchange for a rematch."

"My pleasure." Hand out and fire extinguished, they shook.

Fifteen minutes later, Changbin was sitting back against the ropes, watching the sunlight stream in through the window.

Chaeyoung came back in with two brightly colored plastic bottles.
“Oange or apple juice?”

“Apple juice all *day*.” She threw it into the ring, and he caught it one-handed. “Thought the loser wouldn’t get to pick.”

“Please- I’m courteous by nature.” She slipped between the ropes and folded into the spot next to him. “But I’m glad to hear you accepted your defeat.”

“Nooooo. *Never*.”

They popped the caps in unison, toasted to the hells, drank in the taste of summertime in a bottle.

“I can’t believe you guys had to be threatened with death to finally make your way over here,” said Chaeyoung.

“In my experience, I’ve found it’s the best way to roll. Really puts in perspective the shit that matters.”

“*Right*, you’re a demon. Congrats on getting out of the old Nine Rings.”

Changbin chuckled. “It was only out of luck that I even managed to do it. How else does anyone get out?”

“With a lot of determination and smarts, that’s what.” Then Chaeyoung frowned, tilted her head like, *well*. “Or if you’re me, when you get so bored of it you want to go literally anywhere else.”

Changbin stared at her. “Shut the fuck up.” Smug smile. “Fuck *off*. What ring?”

“Four- Greed. Welded in ‘37. You?”

“Eight- Violence. Died in ‘58.” She nodded: *cool, cool*. “What were you doing in hell?”

"It's kind of our official position- guard the pools of smelting gold, make sure no damned souls escape or try to eat our legs. It got a little tiresome."

"Gee, I can only guess why." As a damned soul himself, Changbin had devoted a good chunk of his time in the pit to annoying the hell out of his ring's guards. "How did you do it?"

"Wasn't too hard- given we're not the ones condemned for eternity, it's easier for us to dip out unnoticed. I saw an opening through the first new dump of sinners that fell in, jumped in through it, and piggybacked the rest of the way through."

Damn empousai. "Sounds like you had it a lot easier than me." A flicker of a long-dead lightbulb flashed in his mind. "Say, uh. Before you made your grand escape, did you happen to know anyone by the names of Wooyoung or Ryujin?"

Chaeyoung considered the question. "Can't say I have, no." Just briefly, his shoulders slumped. "Were they important to you back there?"

"More than you'd ever know." Even after so many years, their faces were the clearest memory he had. "They were reason I was able to escape."

Chaeyoung whistled. "Damn. Actually?"

"Yup. Came up with the whole plan and everything." *And still carried it out even when everything went wrong.*

"I don't know much about the other rings, but I know those seraphs are no joke. How'd you get past them?"

"Aren't. Never were." There were nights where they still snatched him up out of his dreams, screaming their eagle cries. "We found a part where they weren't patrolling, tried to get out there. 'Course,

peace isn't an option in the bloodiest ring in hell, so that went to shit. But still." He made a feeble attempt at jazz hands. "Here I am."

There wasn't a monster on the planet who didn't have a past they could fully link into words. Chaeyoung couldn't begin to understand the full synopsis of his story, but she didn't ask- she'd already given enough. "Sound like good sinners to me."

Changbin nodded. "Couple of the few that actually deserved to get out. The thing is, I don't really know where they are now. But we had some wild times." One of them resurfaced, made him smile. "You ever remember any... flying records whizzing by?"

"Flying records? Only a couple times on the job." Changbin grinned with insuperable pride. "Oh, God, of course that was you."

"Had to pass on the party somehow." The apple juice was almost empty, only a sip left in the whole bottle. "Ever wonder why we had to go to hell and back to meet the people that would change us forever?"

"It is a mystery," Chaeyoung agreed. "But hey. It was all worth it in the end, right?"

"Always."

"When you said you had a greenhouse," managed Seungmin, "I didn't think you meant something quite like this."

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Mina gushed. "After years of cultivation, I've finally found the way for everything to come together."

As it turned out, both Seungmin and Mina were slightly spectacularly awkward when it came to hosting a conversation with someone they didn't know very well. So, when Seungmin asked if there was anything around Hell In Heaven that she liked to do for fun (yes that

was the phrasing he used, he still hated himself for it), naturally, the first place she brought him to was her pride and joy- the greenhouse.

It deserved to be an entire biome on its own; a pantry jungle with the flora of a wooded meadow. Raised beds of mushrooms edible and poisonous fermented in the middle of the room, ringed by pots of violet, mandrake, monkshood, and several deadly others hanging from the ceiling. There were even some bottles and tinctures and dried herbs that Seungmin could recognize from Minhó's special room.

Anyone else who knew their plants might've held their breath at the sight of witches bells* and nightshade blooming so close in proximity, but Mina moved through of it with ease, humming like it was any other Sunday.

He cringed out of the range of a black hellebore. "You've uh. Got a lot of variety here."

"Well, as a sorceress, I kind of have to." Mina brushed a bundle of buttercup leaves. "There are some other things I'd like like to have with a bigger space, but I make the most of what I have."

"Which is..." Seungmin watched with baffled, mostly awed eyes as she fed a tarantula to the Little Shop Of Horrors looking Venus flytrap wearing a collar labeled Cupcake. "A lot."

"Just the basics and necessities. You learn them well when you grow up around magic."

"But I thought you were-"

"Human? If you take away all the spells and stuff, I guess. But I'm not sure I could do that- it's what's kept me alive so long. Plus, witch covenant teachings aren't the easiest thing to forget."

"I... suppose that'd be true." *Same for werewolves, after all.* "Well, what kind of stuff do you even have?"

"Oh, anything I can fit, anything I need for battle or a day in the life." Cupcake snapped at Mina, and she giggled. "Never know when Jeongyeon decides to zap Chaeyoung's bronze leg with lightning."

She said it like it annoyed the shit out of her, but it happened often enough for her to be ready when it did. "Does that happen often?"

"Mostly during the summer, when heat is high. But I don't have to explain coven craziness to you, do I?"

"Definitely not," Seungmin agreed. "Although. If I remember right, gold is an especially strong conductor for lightning. Given it's attached to an actual body..."

He didn't finish- he didn't have to, but Mina remained nonchalant. "Oh, it's never lethal- nothing I can do is enough to bring someone back from the dead. But I can keep it at bay."

If the sorceress could keep her brazen girlfriend alive, there was no telling what else was in her capabilities. "Can I have a few examples?"

"Just you name it."

Well. If she said so. "Nausea and anxiety?"

"Bee balm.*"

"Illness?"

"Feverfew or soapwort."

"Wound healing?"

"Iris.*"

"Just one plant to save Chaeyoung from her ready-made grave?"

"Those are only the main components- and sometimes a simple poultice isn't enough. That's why I've got the spellbook." She pulled a travel-sized journal out of her sweats pocket; anyone none the wiser would have assumed it was a Bible had they not seen the triple moon pentagram in place of a cross. "Sometimes a rune or charm makes all the difference."

A stupid spark of hope flickered to life in him. "So, you wouldn't have anything for, say... speedingupthelycanthropicttransformationprocess?"

Mina blinked at him through a giant magnifying lens stand stationed by the mushroom risers, so her mouth and nose was normal, but her eyes were the size of dinner plates. "You lost me."

It had already taken enough for him to say it once. *Now it's going to be twice as humiliating.* "Well... I mean, if... if it would even be possible," Seungmin stumbled along the track, trying to find his way. "Would you have something that would help a werewolf who, coincidentally, is irregularly stunted in growth, pick up where nature so kindly left off."

Face contorting in confused concern, Mina pushed the lens out of her way. "But I thought you were fine with the way you are."

Seungmin scoffed. *Just what I say to get people off my back.* "Yeah. Until I remember I'm not supposed to be."

Mina's attention was now fully away from her mushrooms. From what looked to be out of nowhere, she pulled out a stool and sat down. "Now what makes you think that?"

Seungmin had experienced enough impromptu interventions in his life to know when one was coming up. "I don't need a lecture."

"And I'm not going to give you one- I'm gonna bet that's what Chan and Minho do. If I'm supposedly going to hand you a spell that'll

grant you the ability to become a full-fledged wolf, then I think I should know why.”

Sounds like a lecture to me. But what would he tell her that she didn’t already know? “Because it was kind of supposed to happen to me, except it didn’t, and it’s been fucking with my life ever since. So, Doc, if you don’t mind, I’ll be taking my prescription now.”

”But you can transform your limbs, can’t you? Isn’t that the same thing?”

”Only one at a time- two, if I’m lucky. It’s nothing like the real thing.”

”Because that’s what you were taught to believe?”

”Because that’s the *truth*,” Seungmin snarled. “Nobody’s ever heard of a werewolf who can only transform one limb for a *reason*- it shouldn’t even exist.” *Leaving me still half a wolf.* “It’s not because I’m special. It’s because for some reason, someone decided I didn’t deserve it, and now I can’t even help out my coven because what I have isn’t good enough.”

On her infuriating stool, Mina nodded. “And when did you start thinking like this again?”

”When the fucking boogeyman crawled out of his closet and shook me up, when do you think?” *Breathe in, bring it down.* “He showed me what I really am on my own. How little of a use I can be to the people I care about.”

”Uh-huh.” Mina’s fist curled under her chin. “And you know that none of your members care about that, right?”

”Well, yeah, but-“

”- and that it doesn’t make you any less capable - “

”Kinda does.”

“ - *and* you’ve since been on the road to acceptance, having speedran the five stages.”

“Only because I can’t do much else.”

“Is that why you want me to help you?”

“So I can live up to my full potential- so I can finally bring something to the table.” The clustering scents of too many aromatics in one place were clogging up his nose. “So can you do it, or what?”

Mina ruminated in her seat, seemingly coming to a conclusion. Then, she magically pulled out another stool and motioned for him. “Sit.”

Seungmin rolled his eyes (“Typical teenage fashion,” - Chan) but did as told. If he wasn’t careful, he could have ended up as a jar of roasted newt or something else bizarre if he displeased her.

“Seungmin,” said Mina softly, her voice like falling petals. “Even *if* I could.” His head drooped. “It’d mean screwing with nature’s entire balance- moon phases, which would change flower blooming times, nocturnal animal wake-up calls, the tides, anything. It’d end up being more of a curse than anything else.”

“But for just a few minutes, at least, I’d be what I’m supposed to be.”

Even Cupcake seemed put down by that. “I don’t know what to tell you,” Mina confessed. “But if achieving full form feels like something you *have* to do to be worthy of others, then maybe think about that.”

That’s all I try not to think about, he thought, *because if I do, I always come back to the conclusion that I’m not.*

But still, he said, “I will.”

“I feel like I’m being lead to some very obscure murder spot that just happens to be in the middle of the woods,” Felix mused.

"Then why are you skipping?" asked Jihyo.

"Cause I like nature walks like these. Nice thing to see before you die."

She shook her head, smile pulling at the edge of her mouth. "Why anyone would want to kill you is beyond me."

"Oh, you'd be surprised."

Jihyo hadn't exactly chosen Felix as her buddy- it was more like he'd simply tagged along and she decided to go with it. However, the valkyrie still had some business to attend to, so that meant Felix got a wilderness tour on the way.

Brushing through a spruce grove dotted with flowers that Jihyo's path had clearly been navigated in order to avoid, they reached its end in a triumphant spotlight of afternoon sun: an ancient stone gazebo, guarded with black thorned vines and fawned over by stalks of gladioli.

Felix gasped excitedly. "This *does* look like a place to die!"

"Do you have a certain wish for it?"

"No, I'm simply making an observation."

Inside was, rather than a simple handheld sphere, was a crystal globe, infused with billowy mist and tattooed with golden tracings. An empty red velvet throne overlooked it from behind a painstakingly neat desk.

Felix picked up a black subject notebook- the tabs were colored by year. "Is this a Death Note?"

"Put that down." He did. "It's for records. I like to keep a memory of the souls I reap."

"Ohhh, so you're like a grim reaper? Met a few of those, they're nice."

"My work is more select." Jihyo crossed to her globe, spun it with a leisurely hand; the tracings weren't just decorations- they were cartography of the world. "I tend towards the fighting types."

She selected a country and zoomed in- soldiers falling in the line of fire. Pregnant mothers screaming through birth. Protestors caught on the wrong side of the rally. Even kids defending themselves from school bullies.

"I choose when to come down, who to come after- who deserves a peaceful afterlife above," said Jihyo. "Sometimes they're willing, and sometimes they're not, but I convince them they deserve to rest." She gestured to the flowers peeking at them over the railing. "These are for them when they leave."

Felix remembered Jisung explaining the symbolism of the flowers after planting them fresh in his garden: strength of character, moral integrity. *The flower of gladiators*. "And how do you do it? The reaping?"

"I don't kill anyone- well, sometimes, it's necessary. But most times I just send them on their way. Or protect ones I find particularly admirable." She chuckled. "Nayeon calls it search and rescue work, but that's because it's how I met her. It's simply the job I do with the abilities I was born with."

One that you didn't even have to do. She had everything she needed here- a home, a family, every stable something imaginable. And still she chose to fly out and give solace to the people who, in their final moments, hadn't known it. *More than I did even when I could.* "Well, she's right."

"Please, you don't have to agree with her just to flatter me." But her humbled smile dropped when she saw the look on his face. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no, it's nothing." Jihyo zoomed out of the country scene, leaving nothing else to absorb her attention. "Like- okay, it's just. I was an angel- I *am* one, but before I fell, back when I was still up with the God Squad, I just took it so *seriously*. I really thought that if I did, I'd be able to help people the way you do, bring them peace. But after I found out that wasn't how it worked, I just- I don't know. Gave up. Took another route, which ended up leading me here, and." He shrugged emptily. "I just think that sometimes, I could've tried regardless. That I could've done more."

Crystal globe swirling beside them, Jihyo stared him down. "Where are you living now?"

Of all the twists she could have taken. "A-A motel, but, didn't you already-"

"What kind of clientele do you get there?"

"Uh, a-all kinds? Mostly lost hikers, but sometimes it's road trip families, or couples, or lonely singles. This one time, we got a guy on the lam who supposedly stole seventeen turkey legs from the OC Fair-"

"Is that really all?" Jihyo stayed right with him. It must've been how she talked to the people who'd fallen from the ledge, gave their hope back to them. "Think, Felix. Out of all those randoms, who's someone you helped?"

He honestly had to think back for that one. In a place like Levanter, the only way to really help people was to change their sheets and stay out of their way. But not too long- there were always a few that needed just a little more.

"One summer, a couple years ago. There was this girl who showed up really late at night- couldn't have been more than Jeongin's age, maybe older. She practically begged for a place to stay, her- her ex had followed her out of Newport. She'd ran from him." She had accepted the room key to 3 with a shaky hand, along with

reassurance cuddles from Berry. "She was there for a week- we consoled her. When Asshat did show up, all it took was a warning from Chan and Changbin to get him to fuck off. She called her parents, explained what happened, and they came and picked her up."

"And have there been more?"

Of course there were. Way too many- the kid whose coming out stirred up a pitchfork mob. The victim of a college hazing gone too far. The swollen belly of a person who didn't have anyone else. Runaway after runaway. "Yeah."

"Then I don't see the difference between me and you." Jihyo turned around, plucked a pink gladiolus from its stalk. "You run a hospice for people who need a place to be safe, comfort them when they no longer believe in wishing for better." Smiling, she handed it to him. "You already do enough."

"On your *left!*" Jisung shouted.

"On your *right!*" Dahyun hollered back.

"Prepare for trouble - "

" - and make it double."

They blasted into the air with a craggy new mountain scraping the air, screaming, "*Team Rocket blasts off at the speed of light!*"

As it turned out, Dahyun also considered forethought of any action to be a waste of time. And she also had a strong love for nature and general mischief making.

Which meant noping out through the backyard and setting off the Richter Scale with enough natural disasters to put both Jessie and James into retirement for good.

"How did you learn to do that?" Jisung yelled after Dahyun, whipping vines out of his wrist latching on to branch after branch to swing ahead.

"Practice escaping angry hippies!" Her form of transportation was leaping from the jagged rock peaks that erupted under her feet the minute her toes touched the ground. "You?"

"All three different SpiderMan trilogies. Totally worth it."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess that Andrew Garfield was your favorite?"

"You really got me fucked up if you think I would settle for anything less than emo-skater boy Peter Parker."

Grinning, the oread grabbed his hand and hauled him forcefully ahead, hurtling for the ground like a flannel-denim-clad missile that rolled onto the grass in a three point landing and sent an uproar of blue hydrangeas bursting out of the earth, sprouting in a tumultuous bloom that followed a crack down the surface. Dahyun bounced off the soft cushioning and, with her own landing, sent slabs of stone jutting out of the dirt beneath, covered in the flowers, all forming one great arrowhead pointed at the sun.

Jisung laughed out loud. "It looks like Pride fucking Rock."

Dahyun slapped him, pulled him along. "Come *on!*"

She taught him how to move with the crags, how to hear the rumble through of the shifting minerals coming together underground to follow her, jump in time as they jutted beneath their feet out of the ground. On every side of them, the trees passed by in emerald smudges of paint, the occasional disgruntled magpie fluttering out of their path.

Once they were far out enough to see the clearing, Dahyun glanced at him. "Now?"

“Not yet.” One jump was another half of a kilometer. *One, two, three-*
“Now!”

Jisung let loose another vine, pulled a hard right off to the nearest spruce, watching as Dahyun jumped high enough to graze the treetops and landed so hard the earth cracked and exploded with all the sediment that had magnetized to her trail. The rock converged under her hands, rising and forming into one great, misshapen, mountain boulder that not even the strongest of Davids would be able to even lift at Goliath. “Jisung!”

On her call, he jumped from his perch, landed like a fly on the rock and pressed his hands to it, inspiring the roots that existed underneath, shaping them into something new that would grow up grand and flourishing and beautiful-

The boulder cleaved in half in a spray of flowering buds, rich brown roots clawing up and pulling it back together as the tree grew higher, bloomed brighter into its own, until the pink tulips had fully blossomed, confident in the thick branches and roots that held it up to the sun.

“Huh,” Dahyun murmured on the boulder’s face, examining the stitched-together halves of rock. “Not bad.”

“Not my best work,” Jisung managed, strained as he hauled himself up from its side. “But she’ll do.”

All in all, the view paid off nicely for the work.

Dahyun dropped her backpack at the trunk of the tree. “I got the strawberry milk. You?”

Jisung unzipped his haul. “Explain to me why you have so many bags of bagel chips.”

“They’re the only thing Mina’s Venus flytrap eats besides bugs. They keep him sane.”

"I feel it."

Sitting with their backs to the tree, they drank it in: the snowcapped mountains, treetops hopefully grazing the skyline, clouds floating through like lazy river rafters. "This was worth it."

"Definitely," Dahyun agreed. "Even if those porcupines mistook us for poachers."

"Even though neither of us need camo to look fly."

"This wasn't eco terrorism, right? Nothing's dead, nothing's broken."

"Exactly. In fact, we created something new, something that hopefully humans won't find."

"Given we're still in Arcadia limits, I think we're good."

"Don't tell me you guys have those tripwires *everywhere*."

"Only in places close enough to Hell In Heaven. Oh, that's *right*- you were the one who set it off!"

"I have a photographic memory, but it has the quality of an android."

She let him down with a smile like *sure, sure*, took a swig of her strawberry milk. "Man. You never see things like these anymore."

He scoffed. "Right? Not unless we make them. Happens with everything- the ondines and the Dead Sea, that kamaitachi and Antelope Canyon-"

"Those Socotra dryads creating the dragon blood trees, the ifrit and the Giant's Causeway."

"I've heard some rumors about the Tianzi mountains, too."

"Oh, that was me."

Jisung choked on his bagel chips. "What?"

"Don't blow a fuse, I didn't do it all on my own. Back in the 30's, I was a communist." He kept staring. "Damn, usually that joke kills."

"Like, communist as in our bagel chips, our tree, our cracked-up boulder?"

"No, just like a group of friends living off the grid, vibing with nature, sharing possessions and responsibilities."

"Oh. Huh." He bummed one of the extra strawberry milks from her. "What was it like?"

"Good, at first. Making friends, supporting each other, occasionally creating some natural wonders. We even had a couple humans who were chill with it." Jisung raised a carton. "But, as the years went by, people started leaving, others tried to take charge even though the whole point of a commune was equality, and it sort of just fell apart. But hey- wouldn't you know, it all came together in the end."

"Yeah." It didn't seem like she missed her past all too much- not with the way things were now. *But she must still think about it- the good times before they went bad.* "My forest used to be like that."

"Oh, no shit?" She didn't react with surprise, just a subtle invitation to continue.

"Mm-hm. Living in harmony, animals and monsters just chilling with the trees and plantlife, making good of the life we had." *Until the trees started falling before they were ready.* "Humans were the ones who ruined it all. You'd think *now*, with their planet literally *dying*, they'd have some respect for it."

"What with freaking climate change everywhere, melting ice caps."

"And forests getting cut down left and right. Even with people who're trying, it doesn't seem to make a difference." Maybe they would both

live to see the day those great mountains crumbled away into dust.
"D'you think it's ever gonna get better?"

Even with her optimism, Dahyun didn't look too sure. "I think it says something that we're still here," she said, "living our lives for as long as the earth around us does. As long as that's true, we've got a reason to keep trying to keep it alive."

They clinked bagel chips like champagne glasses. "All we can do now is have hope."

"Not a bad thing to have."

"Okay." Chan shut the door. "So. You're probably wondering why I brought you all the way here."

"Specifically to the west wing nook in the very corner of the house where people forget you're there," chimed Sana.

"Yes. Well, that is because I have something important that I wanted to tell you."

"And here I thought you were just here because your lives were in danger," she chuckled. "Wait. Shit, did something worse happen? Is Levanter in trouble?"

"No! It's fine! Everything is fine." Deep breath in, deep breath out. "This is just, a thing, that. I wanted to tell someone close to me. And you can't tell anyone."

"Chan, you know I got you no matter what. I promise, I won't say a word." She relaxed back into the beanbag. "What is it?"

He wrung out his hands. "So, um. Y'know Minho and I?"

"Your significant annoyance of seventy-five years. What about him?"

"Well..."

Being unable to say it any other way, Chan ended up whispering into the floor, which bounced off the panels and into Sana's ears, which blew her pupils wide and touched her jaw to the floor and withdrew the loudest, most ear-piercing scream of utter joy ever to shake a doorframe out of her mouth.

"OH MY GOD- "

"Sana-"

"YOU FUCKING DUMBASS- "

"Please-"

"You're gonna ask him to MARRY YOU!"

"Yes, and he doesn't *know* that yet." Chan double checked the empty hall, the lock on the door. "So if you could keep your voice down, that'd be super."

Sana laughed- it was the kind that could fill up a whole room. "Chan, I'm happy for you. Really."

And as much as he knew she meant it, it still lifted a weight off his chest. "Thanks."

"So fill me in!" She lead him to the beanbag beside her's. "How long have you been planning this?"

"I've been wanting for a few years now. The real planning started six weeks ago, when I got the ring." Sana squealed like an excited tea kettle. Chan suppressed a laugh. "Yes, it's real. I hope he'll at least like it."

"Of course he will." She smacked his arm, reprimanding his stupidity for thinking otherwise. "When did you know?"

There were millions of moments- it was impossible to pick just one. "Just the little things over the years."

Like the hour before midnight in their bedroom, they were wide awake, Chan cuddling Berry and Minhó flipping through Netflix to stop on the trailer of *Along for the Ride*.

"Plot twist: he's a Swedish prostitute her father hired to give her a good time," Minhó put in over waggled eyebrows, and Chan laughed, watched as he continued his search. And just kept watching.

"Of course." She rolled her eyes with fake sarcasm. "But you guys've been together for so long- what brought it on?"

"Exactly that. We've had years to change our minds, look for something else, someone else, and we haven't. Never even wanted to. I could spend centuries with him and still be as happy as I've always been." Chan smiled at his ring finger, imagining how the one he'd chosen would look on Minhó's. "I know there's no one else out there for me. There's never been, never going to be anyone I'll love as much as him. I don't care if it's just a piece of metal, a change in title, a day where we celebrate it. I want it to mean something. He's more than just my boyfriend. And I want the rest of my life to be us knowing we'll always have each other."

On his left, the faerie was undeniably tearing up. "Okay, that was beautiful," she managed, voice wobbling on unsteady feet. "And I really hope you remember that for the speech I know you're writing as we speak." He chuckled bashfully. "What the hell could possibly be stupid about this?"

"I don't know- all of it, maybe?" Chan sank deeper into the beanbag, gaze tracking up the ceiling. "I mean, it's basically just some pit stop in forever, if you think about it. What if he thinks it's just some stupid human thing?"

"He wouldn't think that. If you tell him how important it is to you, he'll jump right on board."

"But I don't want him to *have* to just 'cause I want him to. It's just an idea- some pit stop in forever if you think about it."

"Don't do that." He barely even looked at her before she jabbed a finger at his nose. "Talk yourself down before you've even acted. It's more than just an idea to you- that much is obvious." He lolled his head back to facing up. "Come on, it's not like he'll say no." Chan's mouth opened. "And he *won't*. If he does I'll cover him with so much stinging nettle he won't be able to move." Closed. "Chan, you know how much he loves you. There's nothing he wouldn't do to make you happy. What're you *really* worried about?"

A funny thing happened when you focused on one vantage point for too long; everything else around it just fuzzed out into nothing. "That it'll remind him too much of what he used to be."

"What does that mean?"

"That it'll tie him down, keep him bound to one place, one person. That even if he wants to, he won't be able to leave because of a decision he's already made." A flash of cold in his vision, cuffs he hadn't seen in years and never wanted to again. "That that bloody ring will feel like another lamp."

Sana's face sobered with understanding, lost its former levity. "Oh, Chan."

"It's stupid," he muttered bitterly. "But I can't risk it. Especially now."

Chan and Momo knew more about the djinn's past than anyone else ever would, but any friend of Minh's knew some shadow of what he'd gone through, before and with Kai. Though he'd never bring it up willingly, they knew how much it still hurt, and that the scars were nothing to underestimate.

"Chan," she attempted gently. "It would never be like that. Just asking him to be with you wouldn't be like what happened on that ship."

"It might be true for me, but I don't know how he would feel." Outside the window, two robins were twirling around each other, dancing in

the air. "I'm never going to understand completely what those eight years were like for him, no matter how much he decides to tell me. But I know that- that *tyrant* made him feel like a prisoner, someone unable to make his own choices, and I- I could never forgive myself if I made him feel that way even for a *second*-"

"*Chan.*" Her hand on his shoulder steeled him, ceased his rambling. "It wouldn't be like that. You're the one who freed Minho, for shit's sakes. You're *nothing* like Kai."

"I know." The two birds settled on a spruce branch, cooing their own private little song to one another. "I just hope that he never feels that way again. If I've got any say in the matter."

With some friends, they let a silence settle. Told you what you wanted to hear. Dusted off your worries like they were nothing. With some friends, it took a minute to get used to, this person you'd known for so long coming out of the blue and dumping this new ugly anvil in the middle of the floor.

But Sana stayed her hand, waited until Chan's eyes were dry enough to listen. "Chan." They drifted to meet hers, still wet and tinted with red. "If there's one thing I know, it's that what you and Minho have, doesn't come every lifetime. And I know, yours was technically a bonus feature, but the point stands." A damp, breathy scoff. "You've got it- the thing that some spend their lives looking for. Some find it, others don't find it at all. And it's too strong to be spurned by one bad string of rotten luck that left it's stain from way too long ago." He sniffed hard, wiped his nose. "You're a brilliant partner, and a better friend- Minho knows both. Whatever you decide to tell him, however you say it, he'll know exactly what you mean."

So yes, there were some friends. But there was also Sana, who had a special kind of shine that was all her own. "Thanks, Sana."

"Don't mention it."

She let him sit up, use her arm to pull his body up, pulled out the tissues by the bookcase that were always there just in case.

"Now look me in the eye and tell me you haven't been imagining calling that motherfucker your husband, and I bet you can't."

"Oh my God."

"Come on," Jeongyeon encouraged. "You got this."

"I absolutely do not," Jeongin replied with twice the conviction.

"Gotta say, I love being a spectator for this lovely sibling bonding time," commented Tzuyu.

"Shut the fuck up!"

After not having gotten a chance the night before, a quick game of catch-up was in order for the two gumiho, even if it happened to include one sarcastic background lamia.

It would've been more fun had it not also been decreed by Jeongyeon that their catch-up include training with the very element Jeongin had spent years trying to avoid: lightning.

"I just find it interesting that your idea of bonding is teaching your little brother to fight," said Tzuyu. She'd chosen a folding chair a safe distance away from the sprawling landscape of a backyard.

"What are you even doing here?" asked Jeongyeon.

"Everyone else got a buddy- it's not my fault there's only eight of them and nine of us."

"You can watch What We Do In The Shadows *literally* anywhere else."

"I can- but Jihyo says I don't go outside enough."

"I appreciate it, but I really don't want any more witnesses to my failure," Jeongin told her.

"Trust me, kid- you'll do fine. Besides, if family traits are anything, then the worst you can do is short circuit the electricity in the house for a day and a half."

"*Shut up*," Jeongyeon gritted out.

"Actually I would like to hear about that."

"Doesn't matter." Tzuyu mouthed 'you're welcome' behind her. "This is the only way you're gonna learn."

"Have you considered that maybe I don't *want* to learn?"

"I was going to teach you anyway- you would've learned then!"

"But that was before we got separated by a fucking *lightning storm* that no one could control!"

"Ooh, drama," Tzuyu murmured.

"*Tzuyu!*"

"Oh my God, *fine*."

"Is that it?" Jeongyeon's attention had returned to Jeongin. "Is that what you're nervous about?"

He shifted uneasily back and forth. "Well, that and I respond better to positive reinforcement, yes."

Jeongyeon watched him shuffle in the grass six meters away, seeing her little brother instead of an opponent. "Fine. Break."

Seeing that as her cue to stop paying attention, Tzuyu snapped on her sunglasses and pulled out her phone. Jeongyeon crossed the

field to Jeongin plucking at the hair tie around her wrist. "Hey. You alright?"

"Yeah," Jeongin answered immediately, instinctively. "Well. I mean, no, but. It doesn't matter."

"Um, yeah. It kinda does."

"So we can do some Azula-Zuko lightning action and be the super sibling team they never were. I get it."

Jeongyeon retracted, stung. *Sarcasm slapped too hard.* "So I can know why you're still scared of something that happened so long ago."

"Was it really that long ago?" With years of using humor as a coping mechanism, the defense came almost instantly.

"No," she admitted. "But if you convince yourself you're past it, it starts to feel like an old flame." Jeongin squinted at the ground, away from the glare of the sun. "Are you past it?"

"Most days, it feels like I am," he said, concentrating on one blade. "But sometimes, it feels like I just woke up from it all over again."

It was rare that they were together like this- talking side to side rather than over the phone. But there were moments when it still felt like the other was glitching out. When the memories felt even more distant, films tapes rolling, fading to black and white. When brother and sister was a little harder to be.

Still, when Jeongyeon led him down to the cusp of the hill, grass ruffling in the breeze, one couldn't blame them for trying.

They sat with their legs tucked in, sprawled out, all the green and grandeur of Colorado wilderness laid out before them. "A little Sound of Music, isn't it?" Jeongin noted.

"Definitely isn't Austria, but the hills are alive." Jeongyeon stared out at the mountaintops, as if dusting off the snow. If he looked closely enough in her eyes, he could see the lightning rumbling within them. *I wonder if mine look the same.* "D'you ever wonder what it'd be like if that whole storm just... never happened?"

"We'd probably still be like this. Just." He gestured somewhere out into the mountains. "Way out there."

"Way, way out there," she said, chuckling. It was so evidently awkward Jeongin felt touched. "Would you have still learned how to summon?"

To make storms with your hands and voltage with your claws. "With nothing to stop me, I think I would've."

A gentle nudge with her elbow. "You were great at it." He shook his head, a laugh puffing through his nose. "Even when you barely knew the mechanics, when all you wanted to do was run around in fox form. You had *power*." Her voice was weighted with truth, with sincerity. "And you still do."

"Do you really blame me for not wanting to use it?" The tiniest flash in those eyes. "You shorted out your own house for two days- I don't want to know if I could do worse."

"Because that was-" Jeongyeon swallowed her comeback, chose her next with gingerly caution. "Look. I'm not gonna pretend to be the best at this. Face-to-face emotional communication, but, blood's thicker than cactus juice, so I'm gonna fucking. Give it a go." She pressed on. "I don't think this is just about the storm. It did a number on both of us, but it left us with more than just trauma- it changed us." The next part, Jeongyeon hesitated. "I know I can't fight off everything, and that you're growing up, but. I wanna still help you how I can. In a way that works for the people we are now."

Jeongin almost wanted to laugh through the smile that spread over his face. It took her razor's edge, sometimes, to cut down to the truth

of things. “Maybe back to the basics. Baby steps.”

”I can roll with that.” She’d been his teacher before- if she really meant every word, she was willing to do it again.

But because she was his sister first, Jeongyeon poked his cheek with an electric zap that shocked him right to the gallbladder. “*Fuck!*”

A bolt of lightning rocketed down from the blue sky, arbitrary and completely his. Tzuyu’s groan echoed back; her sunglasses had fallen down her nose. “Not a-fucking-*gain!*”

Jeongin punched his big sister, who only laughed like she always did. “See? You’re getting there.”

“I feel like this is sort of our version of a high school reunion,” Minho noted.

“Ah, definitely,” sighed Momo. “Nothing like tea and Trader Joe’s meringue cookies to take you back to the 30’s.”

“Always told you it’d happen.”

”Yeah, you did.”

Momo and Minho had, unsurprisingly, been the ones to start the drift between groups, gushing over the new and the old, which lead to the fulfillment of a promise they’d all but forgotten about. Fortunately, her room was clean enough for the occasion. Despite having the same grandiose build as the rest of the house, her style was smeared all over the room: tapered red leather jacket draped over a bedpost, intricate cobweb patterns in dark corners, a scrapbook open on the vanity.

”We said a lot of things, remember?”

"Many of which didn't end up being true. Did you actually learn how to teleport your cats?"

"That, I did. I just choose not to."

Momo *tched* sympathetically. "That bad?"

"I already got enough scars from the first attempt- I love them, but I hold some self value as well."

"Snaps to that," approved Momo, sipping her earl gray. "Oh! What about assassinating James Stewart just for his voice?"

"Too universal. I figured someone else would get to it before I would- should've predicted I'd be wrong. But that reminds me: did you actually go to The Waldorf Astoria?"

"I did, actually. Letdown, but I did cause a smidge of mayhem." Over the rim of her porcelain, the joroguomo smirked. "Remember when you said you'd never show your face outside the lamp again?"

"Well, *that* was an exaggeration. Obviously I'd need a change of surroundings every once in a while."

"I'm glad you didn't mean it."

Wryly, Minho returned her smile. "Me too."

"And now look at you. All smiley and centered and sober- I mean, who knew that'd happen?" He popped a meringue in his mouth with the same hand that flipped her the bird. "And, dare I say settled?"

"As settled as anyone can be." Minho traced the rose imprint on his teacup. "Don't know if the forties were lucky for anyone, but they sure were for me."

"He's a vampire who irons his polo shirts."

“And it’s a good look for both of us, so I’m not complaining.” But they both knew well it was more than that. *All my years of life, and I never thought eternity would have curly hair and wardrobe full of black.*

“Seventy five years, and he hasn’t wavered for a second.”

Momo hummed into her cup, watching the warm liquid swirl inside.

“How’s he been through all this?”

All this. Somehow, it only felt okay when Momo brought it up. “Great. Careful. Worried.” Minho shrugged blithely. “It’s fine- Chan worries about everything.” *Me always being a top priority.* “I just wish I hadn’t reacted the way I did.”

“It was a reasonable reaction- you saw Asshole *in the flesh*. I would’ve done the same thing.”

“But still- I freaked out, put them on edge. Even here, they’re scared.”

“It’s better than not being scared at all,” said Momo. Maybe only they were wise enough to know that. “If they know what he’s capable of, then they know that they can’t just rush into something dumb.”

“Regardless of how much they’ll want to,” Minho sighed.

“Have I ever told you how I saw one of his guards at the market?”

“No, you fucking didn’t. Seriously?”

“Yeah. Jihyo was ready to lead the coven in a search party- Jeongyeon fried the remote she was holding. It’s just how covens are.”

“*Dumbasses.*” Yet they were the reason Minho walked the earth.

“Still, though. Now that we know he’s out there-“

” - we have to do something,” finished Momo, reading his mind.

“Obviously, we can’t let him *live*.”

"But we can't risk our families here. Not if they aren't ready." Momo bit her lip, cringing at what she had to acknowledge. "Not if we aren't ready."

And the thing was, they had to be. There was no one in Twice or Stray Kids who knew the workings of the grandfather clock of Kai that ticked 'douchebag' with every chime. But if taking that risk meant possibly being taken back, risking *everything*, then...

"I don't know," Minho confessed quietly. "I try not to think about it, not to worry, but I know I can't stay here forever."

"Maybe not forever, but as long as you need to. This place can be your home, too." Momo reached out and squeezed his hand. When her hair fell over her shoulder, Minho could see the burn mark on the left side of her neck, identical to his. "It makes no difference to me."

When they returned to the dining hall for dinner, they took their conversations with them- sharing with those who were curious, continuing what couldn't be picked up some other time, context to the wind.

Down the long line of eight on the left and right (Jihyo overseeing at the head of the table), with the clink and clatter of utensils on plates was lovely little tidbits like "Who's holding you at gunpoint to eat Del Taco?" or "Murder's a natural cause of death, right?" or, from one particularly anguished Chaeyoung, "I can't get the Inspector Gadget them song out of my head, *I can't*," which was of course instead punctuated by Jeongin and Dahyun dropping it like it was hot to the cursed song through mouthfuls of kimbap.

"This feels oddly familiar," Chan noted.

"Have you ever heard of any sane coven gathering?" Jihyo asked him. When she received a reluctant agreement in response, she drank from her goblet of Arizona ginseng like it was age old wine.

Indeed, there was no such thing as a sane coven gathering. The combination of two was rare as it was beautiful, often even dangerous, like pouring sulfuric acid and pure radiation into one of Mina's cauldrons. But above all, there had to be anarchy, no matter how much or how little, because then what would even be the point.

The point itself was made when the very bottom the left and right hand corners of the table, made up by Jisung and Chaeyoung, started singing Shut Up and Dance* just for the purpose of remembering the song that had once been stuck in everyone's heads back in 2014 a new song to lodge in her brain. Being their seat partners, both Felix and Momo started in on it as well, their voices growing over the incessant cacophony in *"She took my arm, I don't know how it happened,"* rising up to, *"We took the floor and she said:"*

Sure enough, the lyrics caught like wildfire down the line, and Changbin, Jeongin, Dahyun and Mina joined in for, *"Oh, don't you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me, she said you're holding back, she said SHUT UP AND DANCE WITH ME."*

"This woman is my destiny, she said:"

"Ooh, ooh, shut up and dance with me,"

And just as that whole lyric telephone party was reaching full potential, Hyunjin and Nayeon leaned over the full length of the table to shout down, *"Slam, slam, oh hot damn, what part of party don't you understand, we should just freak out."**

"What the Pitch Perfect fuck," muttered Jeongyeon.

"Can't stop coming in hot, I should be locked up right on the spot,"

And perhaps it was just for the funny, or to take advantage of the fact that those two had misheard the lyrics so massively enough to hear a completely different song, or to make one already good thing even

better, but midway through a drink of Jeongin's Arizona, Seungmin harmonized:

"Why so serious?"

"Oh shit," Minho piped, just before the roof was blown off.

The entire table became a colorful, disorderly choir, whose shouts sounded adjacent enough to singing for Jihyo to conduct them through a shockingly incredible mashup of the chorus to the first song and the repeated beginning of the second verse for a Riff-Off not even the Barden Bellas could have thought up.

"Oh don't you dare look back, (slam, slam, oh damn)"

"Just keep your eyes on me, (what part of party don't you understand?)"

"She said you're holding back, (we should just freak out)"

"She said shut up and dance with me!"

Chaeyoung pulled Mina out of her seat just to sing, *"This woman is my destiny,"* to her face and dip her low to the cheers and shouts of, *"Ooh, ooh, shut up and dance with me!"*

It was Felix who started monologuing Toulouse-Lautrec's lines during the break, rousing the theater kids of the room, getting the whole house shouting, *"We are young, we are brave, we are:*

"BOHEMIANS!"

"Fuck it." Chan knocked back his tea, pushed out of his seat, and pulled Minho up with him out onto what had become the dance floor.

Half-finished dinners abandoned, the conjoined covens came together for an all-out fiesta of, *"Oh, don't you dare look back,"* mingling with *"So raise your glass if you are wrong,"* and that they were, in all the right ways, all the underdogs shedding their skins for

the freaks they truly were. Glasses were spilled and raised, arms draped around shoulders, chairs were kicked and bodies were twirled every which way, and long story short, the window cracked in honor of the finale.

Minho and Chan made their way out of the sticky, disheveled aftermath, flopping back on the bed they shared.

“Well, don’t want to say I could get used to that, but I’m pretty sure I could,” announced Chan, bundled in a hoodie. “Can’t believe we had to have our lives put in danger to come here, right?”

“Yeah,” Minho murmured. *I wonder how long it’ll last.*

“Hey.” Chan brushed his cheekbone with the pad of his thumb, a mapmaker tracing long-memorized cartography. “What’re you thinking about?”

Everything. “Nothing,” he lied. “Just this.”

After School - Weeekly

*Myth of Actaeon and Artemis reference. It's whatever.

*Mr. Brightside - The Killers

*Rebel Girl - Bikini Kill

*Move Along - The All-American Rejects

*Shut Up and Dance - WALK THE MOON

Raise Your Glass - Pink

*Witches bells = another name for foxglove.

*Bee balm: Clarity, protection.

GRRRLS

Chapter 13: GRRRLS

That was a good time, now, wasn't it? Well, as you've probably known, those don't last forever. It is now time for backstory 2, with our own favorite djinn Minho and his dramatic past.

TW: mentions of violence and death.

I am the latest colors, I sing the newest songs

I read all the lyrics, so I can sing along

I am the latest colors, I hate the newest songs

I can't stand the lyrics, I'd never sing along

I'll never sing along...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

North Atlantic Ocean - 1930

Minho never asked to be found.

He couldn't even think of a time when he ever wanted to be- not even when the same lyric was playing over and over on the record player because Soonie had kicked the needle again. If he could pretend that the world was made of polished cherrywood and marble only to contain him and his three familiars, Minho would live willingly in the ignorance.

The elevator ticked down, down, down- not by floor, but by feet in the air. A golden chute that carried him back to ground level every time a job was done.

He stepped out onto the white marble veined with gray, the elevator materializing to dust, having no use now. "My lovelies, I'm home!"

Silence. Not a voice, not a whisper. Instead, the thud of a book hitting the ground, a vase breaking, the limberest of feet ever so lightly touching the floor, and they came running out to greet him- three cats, the only family Minho would ever need in his life.

The sky was made of spiraling ornate squares and rectangles within each other - rococo geometry painted with gold, stars of crystal chandeliers, glittering over a neverending landscape of a palace with no ending. There was an oasis here, a ballroom there, somewhere a daybed in between. He would spend some time there - how much, Minho never truly knew, since time in the lamp was mysterious as it was fleeting - if he was feeling adventurous or less perpetually bored than usual.

But, oftentimes, he just went straight for the library- a high, winding labyrinth of shelves of books on history, drama, love he would never experience. Good thing too- it was always a lot more trouble than it was worth, in the few times he'd gotten close.

In the center where all the shelves ended in a circle was his hideaway- black loveseat next to a tiny ring of a coffee table stacked high with books and a brandy glass that would never empty, a cat tower settled over a fluffy wine-colored rug that would never collect so much of a speck of cat hair, a life where he would never want for anything.

Home.

Minho collapsed with his whole body on the loveseat, leaving no room for anyone else. The book of the decade: As I Lay Dying.

“Such is life,” he muttered, snapping it open to lose himself in another person’s story, Doongie purring curled around his feet.

Imagine living in a house with no windows- solitary but with style. You couldn’t really tell how much time had passed, if any had at all. Maybe you could try, going off of your own mood or how tired you were at the time, but for all you knew, you might have been calling it quits at twelve in the afternoon. Minho was at least lucky enough to get a newspaper funneled in every now and then, but with this day and age, it just made him want to stay inside more. Like, who the fuck did this Stalin guy think he was? Sure, organization was good, but not when it was policed by everything in existence. Gandhi sounded all well and good in the beginning, if you took away the cult following, anti-Semitism, and casual pedophilia. And, of course there was the minor issue of the whole world being depressed- that wasn’t fun. People ended up wishing for all sorts of things just based off of the lack of what they couldn’t have anymore. Hell, Minho’s last client had wished for a lifetime supply of canned peaches, flannel suits, and his last paycheck. All in all, it just didn’t sound like a good time.

It wasn’t like he didn’t try to take his job seriously, or at least make the most of what he was stuck doing for the rest of millennia. Was it really Minho’s fault that no one listened to the advice he gave so they wouldn’t be left with regret when he was gone? He tried all the time, but *nooo*, a truck full of fucking fruitcake was the most rational first wish a person could think of, not debt erasure or a fixed roof. Even when he was somehow traded into the hands of someone who deserved a lucky strike, want just made everyone forget all logic, forget all basic foundation of *need*- it was something that hadn’t changed about humans since before the 19th century hit its double digits. *And now that everyone’s getting starved, there’s no way just three wishes is going to satisfy anyone.*

Minho knew his way well around the ballpark of humanity- his first rodeo had been as brief as ten disappointing minutes. For all their technological advancements, weird food, architecture, and fancy clothes, they really were all the same as they were when they first

arrived on the planet: just foolish, self-centered status-seekers trying to convince the world and themselves that they had no fear, that they were the powerful ones, the smartest animal, not their own demise.

And if Minho was going to be doomed to grant their wishes for all eternity, he thought he at least deserved to finish his book for a brief sabbatical.

Just as he was getting to the part where Cash broke his leg- “Like a *dumbass*,” Minho scoffed -and hitched a ride on Addie’s fucking coffin, the lights in the ceiling started to flicker. The carillon gong of a church bell rang throughout the lamp.

”You’ve *gotta* be fucking kidding me,” Minho grumbled, slapping the book facedown on the ground. It only felt like a few hours, he’d been on break- how long could that have possibly been in the outside world?

The cats padded down from their perches, mewling concern; obviously they didn’t know what was up either. But Minho’s cuffs had already started glowing, burning into his skin, pulling apart the atoms and drifting east. If he didn’t start heading for the elevator now, he’d end up going out the hard way.

Looking down at himself, the herringbone suit from the last job wasn’t all that wrinkled, and it was a bright enough shade of navy blue that suggested it would be worn for more than just a day at a desk job. Sure, the bronze paisley tie was a little flashy, but he was still breaking it in with the two-tones. “Let’s get this over with.”

After bidding the anarchy trio farewell, promising yes, he would be back soon, and yes, their bowls would forever refill themselves with caviar and salmon cooked just enough not to give anyone tummy aches, Doongie has proven that smoked simply would not do by ruining one very extravagant rug, Minho stepped in the elevator, doors closing around him and carrying him up as he straightened his tie, brushed out the creases of his dress shirt, shooting upwards to rapid ticks like he was being launched all the way to the moon until-

-a thrush of lavender and sugar, both to keep the mothball smell away and to make an entrance, and his feet touched solid ground ground.

When the mist settled to the ground, Minho found he wasn't in a bedraggled makeshift hut of a home, but a gentleman's smokeroom, fully furnished with red velvet and gold, Renaissance paintings depicting scenes of war and victory on the polished wooden walls. Either this was some kind of paradise bunker or this person had enough money to escape everything else happening in the real world.

And that was just over the heads of the ruffian characters that made a ring around him from every angle- some human, some monster, all juggernauts dressed in dull suits and vicious smirks. *I've been expected*, Minho thought with grim pleasure.

"Ignore them," said the man in front of him, voice fluid and moneyed as the throne he lounged across. He wore a jet black waistcoat and suspender slacks to match, white magnolia* in his breast pocket. Despite himself, Minho had to commend his taste. "They're just here for precautionary measures."

"I'm not complaining," Minho replied. "It's just so rare that I get a..." he spared the men another casual glance, waggled his fingers at them. "Welcoming committee."

The man's grin was charisma with a jagged edge. "I'd hate for you to feel unwelcome. Not when we've all been waiting for you for such a long time."

A rumble of grisly, very unreassuring laughter sounded from the circle. "I did notice that your group lacked the usual surprise."

"Well, magic isn't something my brand is unfamiliar with. I, like you, deal in the trade myself."

"Is that so?" *Explains the decor.* No ordinary human in this decade would have had so much coin.

"You didn't mistake me for ordinary, did you?"

"Why, I'd never." For someone who got Minho past his usual working hours, he was keeping up the chitchat well. "You must've had to pay for a ring like that with your own blood."

"Something like that." He switched vertical to sit upright; the fabric of his breast pocket arched over his skin, momentarily revealing black slashes of ink. "I suppose before anything else happens, I should tell you my name."

"That really isn't necessary."

"If you're to remember me for anything, the least I can do is give you a name to a face." His hand came up over his heart, black diamond ring glittering. "I'm Kai. If you can, keep it in mind."

"I'll... try." He wasn't the most eccentric client Minho had ever met, but he was the most chivalrous. *Which makes him even stranger.* "Alright, then. I assume you know the drill?"

"A little familiar, yes." His ring glittered with the purposeful flourish of his hand, which a nearby goon filled with a thick leather tome the color of scorched lisianthus. "I make my wishes, you grant them, and we both go on our merry ways."

"In summary. Upstart such as you must have a couple ideas already."

The corner of Kai's smile pricked up higher, like Minho had said exactly the right answer. "I do. More than a few, actually."

"Lovely." *Let's hope this one's good.* "Though, if we're talking more than a few, you may have to narrow it down. The limit's only-"

"-three cosmic wishes, I know, I know," Kai sighed. "I never did like that rule."

It wasn't plaintive, or childish the way other clients were- it was a statement, musing and oddly whimsical. "Well, there's a lot more than just that. What can I say? With great power, comes great responsibility. Someone has to make the rules."

"But does there have to be? Rules? A someone who makes them? All it does is get in the way of what's truly meant to be." Kai's eyes glimmered with an eager, feverish shine; he didn't wait for a reply. "What if I could wish them away?"

Beneath Minho's feet, the ground swayed. He must have imagined it. "I'm. Sorry?"

"The rules of the lamp. All of them." Kai beamed wider, like he'd just happened upon an incredible discovery. "No more bans on killing, resurrection, emotional control, as long as it's in my grasp. I can wish for that, can't I?"

"I..." The room felt smaller, somehow. Minho rummaged his mind for some way to respond. "I don't- no, I don't think so. To wish for more wishes is-"

"I'm not talking about *that*." He flipped open the book, leafed through page after gold page cover to cover. "I've read all about your rules, studied them, committed them to heart." His hands splayed out and empty. "For what I want, there is nothing that forbids it. It seems as if your stars have skimmed over one crucial detail."

He's bragging. "And." Minho swallowed, fighting to keep still. "What would that be?"

"Since there are no rules that prohibit it, I guess I might as well say it now." Kai's head cocked, smile toned down to something placid, pleasant, even solacing. "I wish the the rules of the lamp didn't apply to me. Surely, you can grant me that, can't you?"

Barter, Minho recalled desperately. *Pitch another deal, a better one.* "I- It- It doesn't necessarily have to be that. Other choices can be made, other options."

But Kai merely laughed. "Oh, beautiful." He lifted a free hand, in which the lamp was raised to his temple like a pistol. "Did I say you had a choice?"

All at once, the beauty of the surrounding wealth seemed to fade, no longer impressive but cloying, encapsulating, a stage set. The smiles of the circle of thugs around him spread out wider, became truly malevolent, teeth sharpened like sharks. The shaggy evergreen rug under their feet felt like quicksand, and Kai was an overlord, sitting in his throne of bone and blood and extravagant lies. A fucking stick-up. *I'd hate for you to feel unwelcome.*

Minho zeroed in on his lamp in Kai's curled fingers. He didn't give a damn about the loveseat, Cash, or Addie. He'd told his cats he would be back soon, and that was a promise he intended to keep.

A star in the palm of his hand, Minho hurled it at Kai's face, lunged for the lamp, and ran.

"After him!" Kai roared at his back, lofty nobleman sensibilities gone. Minho's blood rushed in his ears, the lamp's metal cold and solid against his chest like a block of ice, fleeing as fast as his limited power would let him. Hall after decadent hall he breezed through, kicking up the carpets and pushing past expensive flower vases and paintings that had been so beautiful before; now their eyes followed him down, mouths gaping hollow around a forlorn wail, telling him to *leave, leave, leave.*

There had to be a way out, there *had* to- somehow, he'd gotten in, right? There it was, the light in the tunnel at the end, *there*- down that corridor to the right, to the right, then left and up and fuck all the doors that had ever existed, there was no way he was going to be this asshat's-

The sea salt hit him like a punch.

Its scent clogged up his nose, made his eyes water. Off the wooded prow of the ship, there was nothing- no land, no safety, no miracle in sight. Just an unforgiving night sky and dark, choppy waves crashing into each other. *What if I go too? Vanish under the waves? What would happen then?*

Just the moment's hesitation had been a moment too long; two meaty hands grabbed his arms, whirled him around, and threw him headfirst back into the hallway, tumbling across the carpets and slamming to a stop against a wall.

Head spinning, Minho only looked up in time to see two black leather wingtips followed by a flock of heavy boots enter his field of vision, stoop down and pick up the lamp by the handle. "No..." he murmured weakly, reaching out.

"Trust me, I think some separation will do you good." Kai kicked his hand away, and when he crouched to meet Minho's eyes, he had the face of a saint, a savior he no longer had cause to believe in. "Now, let's try that again, shall we?"

"Fuck you."

"If you think getting thrown around a little bit's the worst that can happen, I'll be glad to prove you wrong." He glanced with distasteful nonchalance at Minho's sparking fingertips. "Believe me, gorgeous. I can do this all night."

Minho said nothing. The contempt that filled his mind would make the stars frown down upon him for the next couple centuries. He didn't even move, but they all felt the blowing breeze, saw the bolt of lightning in a perfectly stormless night. *I'm gonna end this son of a bitch if it's the last thing I do.*

"That's better," Kai praised, straightening back up, eyes taking in every detail of Minho's worn, pathetic face. "Let's get you

belowdecks- a warm welcome to your new life."

The vessel of Amnesia was built like a mountain, sectioned off in floors and rec rooms and a maze of hallways that lead to a different one, like a cruise ship; apparently Kai had had it built to emulate what the Titanic should have been. 'Belowdecks' was the floor below all the lounges and saloons, where the waves crashed against the hull, fighting to break through. Minho found himself wishing that they would.

Closed in by ivory white walls, he trudged along, dragging his feet on the rug, occasionally prodded forward on the heel by the butt of a pipe- the chosen weapon of Kai's enforcers when they were too lazy to transform. In spite of the ship's luxury, the walls were thin as eggshells; he could hear the growls of other monsters he couldn't begin to imagine, hear their laments and groans and pacing.

Perhaps that's how he likes it.

"And this is where you'll be staying," announced Kai, stopping at door 272, sable black paint polished to a shine. "I do hope you'll enjoy it."

And I hope you'll rot in hell. They'd attached chain links to his cuffs, connecting his wrists- just to make sure he wouldn't run away when Kai made his second wish for unlimited wishes, skin of Minho's neck still angry and searing from the sigil that had been branded on it. Now, head bowed to hide his scowl, he said nothing in reply.

"Oh, come now." Kai's finger grazed his chin, and Minho jerked it away, teeth grinding. He didn't have to look at the asshole's face to see his triumph. "Eventually, you will learn to love me."

Kai turned on his heel and left him, flanked by his equally smug posse down the hall until they disappeared behind another elaborate door, leaving Minho standing in front of his own, unable to do the same.

A knock from behind 273 to his left startled his own self-pitying poetic waxing. The knob turned, and a girl's head of loose black hair poked out, scanning the hallways. "Thank God, they're gone." She stepped out in peach-pink rayon pajamas, big brown eyes sparkling despite the late hour, a ready smile on her face like they were going to stay up, swap scary stories, and become best friends. "Welcome to Amnesia, neighbor."

"Nothing about that sentence is welcome, except for the fact that I wish I had that." Then Minho doubled back. "Neighbor?"

"Uh, yeah. That's kind of what you call the people you live next door to." He shook his head: *doesn't ring a bell*. "Jeez. What kind of rock have you been living under?"

"A lamp, thank you very much."

"*Oh*, so you're the djinn. Lucky me." She twisted the knob to Minho's own door. "Let's see what you got."

"What- how do you know about- *hey!*"

The girl breezed right around him, through the door and into the suite. "Ah, would you smell that? Nothing like that old new room smell." She knocked on the inlaid wooden paneling pressed to the walls. "Yup, still loose. This'll be good for stashing." Moving on, she blinked up at the domed ceiling lights which had been nailed into a white coffered ceiling. Touched the polished ebony table and chairs. Rearranged the flowers in the vase. Fluffed the floral pillows on the couch and peridot green canopy bed. Wrinkled her nose at the matching paisley wallpaper. Poked through the side door where the bathroom was. "I think you'll get on nicely here."

Minho cocked a brow. "So you're done now?"

"Just making sure you've got all the accommodations. Most first classers do, but some luxuries go missing. We got some pretty sneaky hobgoblins on this ship."

“Hob- wha-“ This had to be a joke, another game they were trying to play with him. “Sorry, have I given you the impression that I actually want to be here?”

The girl looked up, finally taking him in. “A little sour on the edges, but you’ll learn to settle in.”

“Settle in?” Minho barked a harsh, brittle laugh. “I don’t know if you heard the way I was *manhandled* two floors up, but I’m quite positive that settling in is the last thing on my mind.”

“Look, I know you’re new here, but trust me- it’s best to get with it.”

“And let that conniving asshole have his way with me? Not with all the years I’ve lived.”

“Once you spend a couple here, you get your ego checked.”

“Years? Oh, *hell* no.” Minho spun on his heel, made for the door.

“There is no way I’m spending that kind of time here, not for another *second*.”

“And what’re you gonna do, huh?” The barbed rim of her question stilled his hand around the knob. “Tell Kai you want out? Fight back? Escape?” When she crossed the room, the set of her eyes toned down to something hard and serious. “If you’re here now, it means you’ve already lost.”

Lost. The battle, the war, and the land he’d stood on before. “How?”

“Simple. You got a room up here, a residence- means Kai’s going to keep you around.” Minho scoffed. “And, you’re alive. Means he’s got use for you.”

“What does my life have to do with that?”

“He told you he had magic, right?”

“Tragically, yes.”

"It's more than that- Kai's a warlock." Immediately, Minho groaned, head thrown back. "Yeah. Pretty much sums it up."

"I thought those went out with the morlocks in the Renaissance!"

"If that was the case, we wouldn't be here." The girl stepped closer, just so her drift would be caught. "He dropped in some cursed place in time, and he knows his shit- too much. If he wanted you dead, you would be."

Warlocks: self-glorified mongrels of the people who sold their souls and hoarded any speck of magic they came across, any spell, any rune, any charm that could give them more, pushing them farther and farther off the brink of humanity with every bit they harnessed for themselves. "Shit."

"Yup."

"Then what does he want with us?"

"What would any twisted shitbrick like him want with beings like us?" She shrugged. "Power."

The one thing Minho had in abundance. *And now I'm supposed to use it all to serve him.*

Was it really that different from what he was used to?

"Could you explain?" asked Minho lamely. "What we're doing here- what *I'm* doing here?"

The girl watched him for a moment, his hand on the knob, as though wishing she didn't have to. Somberly, she muttered, "Get away from the door."

In the alcove by the window, both of them on either side of a crimson parted curtain, she told him the story.

"We don't know how it started- some say a coven killed his family or something- but back in the 20's, Kai started building his empire. He'd gotten enough magic, money, and resources in store to make himself an enemy to overpower any monster he came across, make them fear him and join his ranks. I don't know what's in that damn book he's always got, but it was enough to keep dragging him up the ranks, rich enough to withstand the shit going on in the mortal world, strong enough to keep anything else from touching him. This boat is how it all travels- him and his guards and us with it. He's got connections everywhere, and they give him ports to stop at, sightings of powerful monsters to recruit. Everywhere he goes, his reign of terror gets stronger, and so does he."

"Where we come in- well, everyone's got different roles. It all depends on what you can give to him, how much and for how long. You can tell by where they are in the ship: first class, second, and third. The first class monsters- like us -are valued for beauty or power, often both. We're the ones he keeps closest to him, flashes around like that bullshit ring of his. The second class ones are used more for grunt work, the heavy lifting and brute force that involves getting hands dirty. But the third class ones are the unluckiest- they're down at the bottom, treated like the coal and firewood they're roomed next to. They're the weakest with the least to offer. But when Kai finds a monster, he always finds a use for them. He'll keep them as servants, housepets, or worse- whenever he'd got a new hex or enchantment he wants to try, he'll test it out on them, make them his guinea pigs. If he thinks you're worth more than that, you count yourself lucky."

"Why doesn't anyone rebel?" asked Minho.

She shrugged a light, weary shoulder. "A lot don't see the point. Once he ransacks their homes, he breaks their spirits too- gives them nothing to hope for, dream of coming back to. And those who want to can't. We're all indentured to Kai in some way."

Something about her wording gave Minho the feeling he wasn't the only anxious one in this case. "What's your deal?"

"Me?" She leaned back, eyes distant and unfocused. "He found me three years ago. Killed every sister in my cluster. Kept me alive because I was the last one standing."

Amidst the horror upon being read word for word why his latest client was an even bigger asshole than he thought, Minho felt for her. "I'm sorry."

"Well, like I said. Even if I could, I can't." She nudged the toe of his shoe with her bare foot. "What about you? You couldn't have been so eager to leave for no reason."

"Asshole has my lamp- without it, I can't get out of here." The faces of Soonie, Doongie, and Dori flashed before his memory. *I hope they're not too scared.* "I've spent my whole life serving people, but I've never been roped into anything like this."

Arm looped around her knee, the girl whispered, "I heard him talk about you."

Minho's smirk puffed out through his nose. "No shit?"

"When you're in the room where it happens, you sponge up a lot." Another toe poke. "Apparently he'd gotten a tip that an ancient lamp with suspicious mojo was gonna be a prime seller in a black market bid. Kai wasn't sure it would be a djinn, but still. Said he would take a risk for a 'good investment.'"

"He called me a fucking *investment*?"

"Dotted i, crossed t."

"Fucking *bollocks*." Minho took inventory of the room, all of its hideous beauty. "Would it be possible for me to just. I don't know. *Explode* this ship just to spite him?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Minho turned: *you're fucking with me.* "Might just look like wood and tin, but Kai encrypted the fuck of it with all

kinds of enchantments. So, yeah. Not just for cruising with class.”

Behind the clear glass panels, the sea was calmer, waves dark and rolling in turns, yet still mysterious as ever. “Guess it’s safe to say we’re all pretty fucked here.”

“Pretty much.” Even so, a hint of the smile that greeted him at door 273 reappeared. “But, maybe we could make it less so. I help you blend in, you keep me company.” Double brow raise. “Well- I don’t *know*. Entertainment. Banter. Seal of protection. Believe it or not, stuff gets boring around here sometimes.”

Minho had had a lot of propositions made to him- some enjoyable to comply to, some definitely not. *If I’m going to get out of here, an ally might not be a bad thing to have.* “Fuck it. Deal.”

“Great.” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Momo.”

He shook. “Minho.”

For the next eight years, Minho dreamed of escape.

He dreamed of it in his sleep and awake, which was just as much of a nightmare. Kai insisted he be at his side at all times, an extension of his right hand: “I never know when I might require something.” Momo, one of his more trusted bodyguards, was usually positioned by the wall with him, lower body transformed into a spider’s abdomen and spindly legs, there to catch a sideways glare of *fucking kill me now* with a look of sympathy.

The first few weeks were the worst- looking Kai in the face, following him around like a trained puppy, trying to pretend that it was temporary, that he was just any other client, that it would all be over before he knew it if he gave him what he wanted. But sometimes venting to Momo afterwards wasn’t enough- the act would drop, fuse would blow, and he’d watch Kai freeze as if struck, then square up, root him to the spot with apathetic, spiritless eyes that had had their

humanity purged of them long ago, curse him in a tongue that couldn't have possibly been invented by one and make him pay the price with a spell or a raised hand that would shut him up. It would get both harder and easier to hold his tongue, but Momo would always knock on his door with bag of ice for a bruise or spun gossamer for a cut.

"Where do you even make that stuff anyway? Like, what does it come *out* of?"

"Just so you won't feel comfortable bleeding to death, I'll leave that question unanswered."

He would come to learn it was like that for everyone, regardless of their ranks: hatred behind carefully molded masks of stone, soldiers marching in tandem, quiet solidarity. They were the cogs working behind the machine; if you looked closely, you could see which gears rolled each other along. The ajatar putting her hand on the shoulder of a mapinguari, having just come up from the cargo hold after mouthing off to Kai. The buggane in room 284 up across the hall who left stolen goods after lights out for anyone who hadn't gotten the chance to eat a proper fare that day- word was that he used to make the best Danish kringle back home. The satyr covering for the yaoguai and yurei meeting in the boiler room; due to their difference in levels, they barely got to see each other.

It wasn't much of a family, just a group of beings who understood and cared for each other enough to make their existences in what was a general hellscape just a little better. "We're all just helping each other get by," Momo summarized.

But if someone went too far, committed an especially unforgivable act- caught planning a coup, sabotaging the ship, executed a direct act of violence against Kai -and was silenced for good, there was nothing done in their remembrance: *no mourners, no funerals*. Their beds would be filled by another the next day.

"He never keeps any water monsters," Momo told him one day. "They're the only ones who might overpower him on this plane."

When they weren't floating listlessly through the ocean, Kai scheming and plotting away at how to attain more of this and that, the Amnesia made stops at any place with a port, though never for any kind of pleasure. This was when Kai had gotten a tip. Those were days of reaping, though he called them quests.

"Anyone or anything you find, bring them to me," Kai ordered every time. "No exceptions allowed."

They'd turn their backs, ready to carry out, but the warlock grabbed Minho by the elbow every time. "And Minho?" He waited until he met his eyes with a glare. "I wish that you won't get distracted this time."

A breeze blew. Mist clouded his senses. Minho held the stare. "Yes, Kai." Every. Time.

Thus they were sent out to root and ransack through any place they were stationed: townships, whole buildings, West sides, East sides, anywhere there was a flicker of magic to be traced. Not a pebble was left unturned; was it shiny? Bring it to Kai. Was it rare? Bring it to Kai. Was it a monster that the crew had never seen before? Welcome aboard, buddy.

It wasn't like they didn't try to help others get away. Trinkets, Kai could have his way with those- living beings deserved at least a fighting chance. They would find the reasons of their journeys, and just look at them and *know* they wouldn't be able to take it. They were too young, too old, too broken already. So doors would be opened, walls broken, windows shattered with bare fists- anything to give those poor bastards the chance they hadn't to get out. For all Minho knew, some did- when they'd leave with bounty but no target. Kai would be fuming, yet no one gave a word away. But when their objectives were dragged up the drawbridge, kicking and screaming, a glimpse of a wince would be all it took.

More than a few times, Minho himself tried to play the hero- 1935, a village a few ways away from Cabo de Roca. Breaking into a squat one-story to find the trio of mouros huddled together in a corner, shaking in fear of a stranger with purple hair and a costly suit. *Of me.*

"Er," Minho stammered. Hurriedly swallowed it down. "*Não tenha medo. Vai.*" They stared up at him, quivering in disbelief. "*Vai!*"

Fueled by their despair, they hurried for the closest window and threw it open, Minho turning away so he could have deniability.

*"Mariquil."**

Kai drifted in through the door Minho had left open. The mouros froze in place, every bone rigid and stuck midair. His black diamond glowed- a wave of his hand, a flash of deadly silver; Minho shut his eyes before he could see their demise.

When they were opened again, he saw the wall charred with spot where the mouros had been. "No exceptions," intoned Kai.

In the nights, when he could get some peace for himself, they were too gloomy to spend on his own- either it was his room or Momo's where they unwound, lounging by the alcove with a stolen bottle of champagne and a plate of daigaku that one of the third class servants slipped through the door.

"I had the chance to get out before any of this," Minho reflected, temple pressed to the glass as he gazed at the endless churning deep. "I was right on the deck, the ocean in front of me."

"Would you have jumped, have they not caught you?" asked Momo from against the foot of the bed. Her hand was curled around the neck of the bottle, half-empty.

"Not then." Not when he'd thought death was a bullet he would never catch, a mercy would have chosen. "But maybe now." *Drowning would be a way to go.*

Momo watched him blankly, blearily. “Feel the fuck out of that,” she murmured, and drank.

Sometimes, Minho would dream of a different ending: one where someone would come along and save him. But years would pass, and he’d learn that only you could save yourself from eternal damnation- if you dared.

Come 1938, and their conquests had taken Amnesia all the way to the Falkland Islands, where supposedly a peryton had been tracked there from Argentina.

“Lock and load, hellraisers!” yelled Brutus, a cyclops that had been with Kai since the beginning.

“*Gory, gory, gory, what a hell of a way to die,*”* sang Momo as she ran. Minho snickered, almost tripping over his own feet.

The coast village, once peaceful from afar, was turned into a crime scene. It’s sounds, mixed with the cries of seagulls and scent of sea spray and fish belly, became familiar again; the war cries, the blasts of magic through entire homes, the howls of pain. Minho tried to ignore that last part as he ran through the streets. *Stay on task, find your directive, don’t cause any more trouble than what’s already been made.*

Door after window he threw open, finding only terrified human families (who he left alone) or places where patrons had already made their escape, shown in overturned chairs and open back doors and meals that were still warm on the dinner table. “Let’s hope they at least got to eat *something*,” he muttered, poking a spinach soufflé with a fork.

Had the windows been shut, Momo leaping through would’ve gotten glass all over it. “Get to the chapel,” she panted, cheeks still splotted red. “I think I found something.”

Miraculously, the chapel was the only thing in the whole town left untouched- the rose windows without cracks, the pews empty, even the rug spotless. All that was left at the altar was-

"A *coffin*?"

"I heard a rustle in there, okay?" Double brow raise- it was a common expression between the two of them. "Come on, we've found weirder things in weirder places."

"Cryptic as fuck, but whatever you say."

Minho knelt low, trying to peer through the crack of the seam. Blooming a star in his hand, he started to bring the light towards it.

Boom! The coffin lid burst open, sending Minho scrambling back.

Atop the cross where Jesus hung emaciated and crucified, perched a fair, trembling boy that couldn't have been more than sixteen, seventeen, wings of a soft periwinkle hue curved around his back, shaggy brown hair curling around the young stag antlers protruding from his temples.

The peryton. "Shit," Minho cursed.

"What do we do?" hissed Momo. "He's just a kid."

"Get away from me," the boy shouted, his voice too watery to be truly intimidating. "I- I'm not afraid of you!"

Damn you to hell, Kai. "Watch the door," Minho whispered. "I'll talk to him."

Righting him up, Momo bolted out the double doors. Minho placed a foot on the steps, held his bare hands out in surrender when the boy's wings quivered. "It's not us you need to be afraid of," he said. "We won't hurt you."

"Then who's going on out there?" The boy demanded.

"Beings who will." Minho lowered his hands, and the peryton fluttered hesitantly to the ground. "You can fly well, yes?" Nod. "Good. When I shoot that corner of the ceiling there, you get the fuck out and don't stop, even if anyone sees you. Okay?"

He swallowed. "Okay."

Minho rubbed his hands together, shaping another, bigger ball of luminescence. When the comet was ready, he lobbed it straight through the ceiling, making a hole big enough for a gangly teenage boy to fit through. "You have to go. Now. Quick, before anyone sees you."

But before he could move, the double doors were thrown out wide, Momo being the driving force that collapsed to the floor, coughing against the pews for support. Kai breezed past her, not even seeing beyond the peryton. "So *this* is what you were trying to keep from me?" He tched, like they were so insolent. "You two always get the most ridiculous ideas when you get together."

Minho started forward. "Kai, leave him alone-"

"I *wish* you would shut your mouth for a moment."

As if lined with glue, Minho's lips zipped together, trapping the breath he tried to take. Kai sauntered ahead past him, towards the peryton. "Hello," he said, in the same fooling, cordial tone he'd used to greet Minho years ago. "I hope you know how much trouble we've gone through to get to you."

"So *you're* the guy that's been doing all this," the boy growled. *Already off to a bad start.*

"Only for your sake." Another step- the only thing between them was the barren coffin. "Small town such as this- surely you want more than that?"

"I know who you are!" the peryton spat, feathers ruffling and canines bared. "I know what you do to whole towns, to monsters that you capture. I'll *never* go with you."

The leisure on Kai's face melted; it seemed with every passing year, his temper got shorter and shorter. "Is that so?" He raised his hand, and the boy faltered an involuntary step backwards. "So be it."

"Kai, *don't!*"

Minho's voice tore out of his throat, past the jinx sealing his mouth shut. The warlock's attention turned irately to him. "It was one mistake. Look at him- he's young. He can make up for it with time. Don't hurt him."

"Minho, I know you have your sentiments, but *really-*"

"He can learn." Minho stepped in front of the coffin, in front of the boy. "He can come with us. He'll grow into it. He'll behave, just like the rest of us. Just spare him." The last word was a desperate, futile, "*Please.*"

It was one of the few times he had ever said the word to Kai's face- and for once, it seemed to do the trick. "Oh, beautiful. You know I can't resist it when you beg." Minho gritted his teeth through a grimace as his hand brushed his cheek, pushed him aside into the pews. "Peryton. What is your name?"

Startled, the boy straightened. "Kai." Then, nervously, he added. "Huening Kai."

A bemused smirk split over Kai's face. "We'll have to stick with that if you're to come aboard- wouldn't want anyone confusing us." He sent a derisive glance towards Minho. "Get the jorogumo on her feet. Don't make me regret this." At Huening Kai's terror-stricken face, he smiled. "A pleasure to meet you." A flourish of his navy coat, and he strode off down the aisle.

Huening Kai followed Minho down, watching him sling Momo's arm around his shoulders, the other clutching her side. "I don't get it," the boy whispered. "You made a freaking comet with your hands. And you're a *spider lady*. Why can't you just team up and take him out?"

"Because I told you before," Minho said wearily, sparing the kid a warning look over his shoulder. "We're not the ones you should be afraid of."

With some extra bargaining and examination, Huening Kai was enlisted into the first class rank on account of his 'outer beauty' and 'aerodynamicity.'

"What does that have to do with *anything*?" the peryton asked in a hushed voice.

"Nothing at all," Minho replied. "But you'll find it makes the difference."

The outburst at the chapel would've earned him a punishment in the cargo room that would have lasted days, but with the perks of first class, all the peryton really had to do was be a centerpiece when the now and then required it and train with Momo to keep his strength up.

"So basically, I'm a trophy," Huening summarized grimly.

"You get used to the idea," said Momo. "In time, you even become thankful for it."

More than anything, though, Huening Kai had questions. Too many questions some Minho and Momo could answer, some they didn't dare to- how had Kai gotten his power, who were some weak links that were close to him, what were his possible weaknesses.

"We've told you before," said Momo on his third week. "You can't fight him."

"We're trying to protect you," Minho enforced. "But if you decide to do something stupid, there won't be much we'll be able to do."

"Fine, then I'll do it alone."

"What'll you even do?" asked Momo, trying to talk him off the ledge. "He's got guards on him from all sides- you'll be down in seconds."

"Why are you doing this? Don't either of you want to be free?"

"Everyone on this goddamn ship wants to remember that feeling," Minho told him. "But we don't want to die trying."

"Trust us when we say it's for your own good," Momo pleaded. "We know what he can do. If a djinn and a jorogumo can't fight back, who knows how slim a chance you have? We've met millions who've tried- all of them have failed."

Huening Kai steeled up, jaw clenched and set. "I haven't tried. I don't know if I'll fail." He left to his room.

He doesn't, thought Minho. But we do.

Three more weeks passed, and nothing- they hoped he'd given up. But when had any prisoner on the ship of Amnesia gotten lucky?

Huening Kai's sixth week, three days after a raid (ahem, sorry - *quest*). The dining room was filled with its usual contestants- Kai at the head, Minho at his right hand seat, some other select first classes, and Momo and company standing guard.

"It's always interesting, to see what humans consider a dictator," said Kai over the day's newspaper, waving his wineglass like an ancient scholar. "Just get a couple people behind you, a logo, and a backbone, and you're set to run the walls down."

"Completely uncanny, sir," chirped a pamola down the left.

Unlike anyone we know, Minho snarked internally, eyes on the spread before him. “Mm-hm.”

Kai speared a bite of lobster, chewing thoughtfully. “This is excellent.” He craned his neck around the back of his throne. “Momo!”

Momo, who’d been leaning back against the wall, jolted upright in an instant. “Kai?”

”Send my compliments to the chef.”

”At once.” She set off running for the back door to the kitchen compartment. “Chef!”

A pot clanged against a surface. “Yes?”

”You have beautiful eyes.”

Minho pursed his lips tightly together. Even Kai didn’t seem to have the energy to reprimand her. “Alright, alright.”

Momo retreated back to her spot, hopping achingly from foot to foot. *My feet fucking hurt*, she mouthed in agony. Smiling sympathy, Minho motioned for her to hold on until-

Oh God. Oh, fucking no.

Just as quickly as he’d appeared, Huening Kai fled out of sight and back into the dark, obscured by the shadows of the domed ceiling.

I just had to look up. Now he had to watch that little idiot jump from place to place with flickery mothlike ease, concentrated on his target, getting closer with every move. *Tell me he’s just trying to sneak into the kitchen- somebody, tell me that’s all it is*.

But Kai kept talking, and Huening kept leaping every which way, his wings keeping him light on the air, hanging on to the stem of the chandelier that hung from the ceiling. And no one else was even

looking. Brutus was gone, and he was never gone. Had he actually done something to pay him off?

Minho tried to get Momo's attention. *Kai*, he mouthed, panic spiking as she glanced in confusion at the warlock at the head of the table. *Huening Kai*, he tried again. And she was just starting to reply when the tiniest thump hit the floor, the drop of a penny, and her eyes blew wide.

Huening Kai was creeping behind Kai, the back of his throne just enough the obscure his figure. In his hand, a silver knife, engraved in Chthonian; it must've been stolen from the treasure vault. *He's been doing this over all our heads.*

Minho set his fork down, and Momo moved to hold the peryton down with two other guards, but the blade was already being raised.

"Ugly brand and worse mustache aside, I do have to hand it to the guy," Kai went on, nose deep in the folds of paper, ignorant of what was happening behind it. "Because even after everything—"

The knife sank into the cushion just below his ear. It made every heart in the room drop to the ship's hull.

Kai finally looked up, a trickle of blood running down his earlobe, pulled it out with an icy, emotionless look that made Minho's blood run cold. "He just doesn't know when to quit."

Minho pushed out of his seat; Momo changed her direction. Huening Kai began to stumble back.

"Mariquil."

The peryton boy froze, locked in blood and bone. Kai leapt out of his seat so fast the throne keeled over, rounded on him, hand outstretched and flashing silver, making Huening flinch in every part of his body. With the flick of Kai's wrist, the boy was cast out through the double glass doors, and into the storm out on deck.

Rain pattered down in furious sheets, making their steps onto its wooden surface slick and stumbling. The ocean whooped and howled in response, the tide dancing in wild, roaring waves that rose up as soon as they crashed down. The moon bored over them, a puppeteer, a cruel goddess, watching as Huening Kai floundered on his feet, as Kai followed with livid tunnel vision, undeterred by the storm, yelled out as he sent a whoosh of flaming silver to blast him in the chest, send him back down.

Minho and Momo followed hurriedly after, their duties forgotten, eyes on the boy. "Kai, stop this!" Momo yelled.

"I listened to you *once* before about this creature, and you proved me wrong," Kai growled, curling his fingers, festering the wound, making the peryton cry out in pain. "He will now pay the price."

Huening Kai choked, spat out rainwater, grasping for any air that remained. Kai, one hand remaining on him, extended the other to Minho. "Djinn. Come to me."

"What?" Minho looked from his hand, the drops falling from his fingers, and to the boy curled up into his side, reborn in screams all over again. All too quickly, he understood. "*No.*"

"Minho—"

"*No!*" he yelled. "I am not going to help you *kill* a poor—"

"I wish you'd just *fucking* do what you're told."

Kai's eyes were glowing in anger, stolen magic, deadly silver. Minho had never been so sure he was looking straight into the eyes of the Devil.

Momo released him with shaking fingers as the compulsion drew him forward, the moon summoning another puppet.

Huening Kai met his wavering gaze, blood dripping from his nostril, mixing with the water. "I'm... I'm sorry."

You stupid boy. Stupid, innocent, reckless boy.

"String him up."

With trembling hands and glowing palms, just the same as Momo's, he lifted the peryton into the air before him, just beyond the railing of the ship- a mockery of the escape he hadn't been able to make.

"Now drop him."

"*No!*" Momo shrieked.

Minho's heartbeat protested in all directions, trying to find any way to make its own breakout. "I can't."

"I wasn't asking you," Kai snarled. "*Drop him.*"

Already Minho's fingers were relaxing their hold- there was no way he could hold on much longer. Huening Kai's body hung quivering and alone, facing the brunt of the storm as a one man army set to fail. White clothes and hair plastered to his body, wings out, he already looked like his destiny of a drowned saint- young, rosy cheeked, hauntingly and forever beautiful. *He could never deserve something so heartless.*

The barest flick of a finger- Kai couldn't have seen it, but when the comet shot out from the sky above them all, there was no one else who could have sent it straight through Huening Kai's forehead, a swift bullet. The last mercy he would ever receive.

Minho dropped his hands and the limp body fell into the sea's embrace.

Momo made a garbled sound like a scream and a sob. He could barely hear it through the ring in his ears- maddening white noise.

He crumpled to his knees, watched the waves swallow up the sky's fallen angel, letting the downpour soak him to the bone.

Kai approached from behind.

"You are mine to own- your rebellion will never be more than disobedience. And disobedience will *always* be corrected."

He walked off- into the dry, pale luxury of his own making with another pawn to cross off and replace.

Momo rushed to Minhø, collapsed beside him, arms around his neck in comfort for the both of them. "Hey," she chattered, words bubbling in lava that cooled into something rock solid when the rain touched it. "Are you okay?"

Something unlocked in Minhø- a knot in the base of his shoulders, coaxed out by the squall, a final shred of tolerance, the last straw.

His hand covered hers. "Let's get the fuck out of here," Minhø rasped, hoarse as a risen corpse. "*Tonight.*"

Throughout the years, Minhø and Momo had been able to trace out something adjacent to a map.

And by adjacent he meant sporadically placed bubbles drawn by Momo and a shittily accurate ship-blob drawn by Minhø.

"There's a reason no one gets a proper tour when they arrive," said Momo. "But if we pay enough attention, we can make our own conclusions."

Lights out was eleven o' clock sharp, and taking the stairs up to the elevator took ten minutes from where they were. And the elevator itself was blocked off by two hulking owlmen who protected it with their lives.

“They won’t be able to miss us, not with those eyes,” muttered Minho. It probably wasn’t too smart to go strolling right up to them either.

“The point’s not to go unseen,” replied Momo calmly. “Just to go quietly.”

“Because that makes sense. Have you even seen them? They’re huge. They’ll- fucking vore us before we get halfway.”

“I didn’t say we were gonna ask permission. Besides, size doesn’t matter- owls are dumb as shit. Their eyes literally take up two thirds of their heads.” Double brow furrow. “Jeez, try cracking open a nonfiction sometime.”

“Excuse me, I read.”

“Follow my lead.”

Minho half-covering behind her, Momo stopped confidently in front of the two enforcers. “Hector, Hugo. Nice night.”

Their heads cocked at the same time, twisted in an entire 180 to look at each other, then back at Momo.

“Okay that was *entirely* fucking terrifying,” Minho hissed. “Is this really the plan we’re going with?”

“We wanted tonight, we’re getting tonight.” Back to the owl twins, she said, “Heard there’s a storm going on tonight.”

Before either of those imbeciles could break their necks inclining their heads to say ‘isn’t it already?’ Momo lunged at the speed of light and slapped a mask of gossamer over their eyes, stepping aside for Minho to split the star he’d created behind her back and press it into their foreheads with heels of his palms.

“Damn, did you fry their braincells?” Momo marveled.

“Nope, just stun. We have about three minutes.”

Blinded and bumbling around, they slipped past onto the elevator and jabbed the number five.

As the muzak carried them down, Momo asked, “Why did we wait so long to do this?”

“I don’t know,” Minho admitted. “Fear, obviously. Extra planning time?”

“Huening’s death won’t be in vain,” she vowed. “What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you get out of here?”

They’d talked about it before, when they didn’t believe it would really happen, but now possibilities were endless: *tell my cats how much I love them. Finally get out of these monochrome shifts that Kai dares to call suits. Drink the rest of that cognac and pour it over the book I never finished.* “Bury myself so deep I never have to see another living mortal ever again.”

A scoff. “So optimistic.”

“After a near full decade of shining that shitheel warlock’s shoe, I’m ready to be done with humanity.”

“And I got three more years on you- just because Kai was a shitheel, doesn’t mean the whole rest of the world is.” Momo settled back on her feet. “I’m gonna see it.”

She already looked ready to run for it. *Of course.* “Send me a postcard now and then, would you- remind me I made a friend that can actually talk back to me.”

Momo snickered. “Sure thing.” Then. “Huh. Friend. Have we called each other that before?”

Minho had to think about that one. “I don’t think we have, no.”

"Sounds nice." She stuck out her hand to shake. "I'm glad it was you."

He shook. "Me too."

Momo got off on the fourth floor- there was still one thing they had to do.

"Remember, when you see me, that's when you enter," she said.

"I know," said Minho. "You sure you can handle them? Brutus and Ivan don't let anyone in easy."

"Don't you worry about me." She swept her hair back as if placing a crown over her brow, and it slicked her bangs off of her forehead, opened three extra smaller eyes over her regular ones, her lower body swelling black and rising until eight spindly appendages replaced human legs and a spider's abdomen spread a breastplate of coarse coal-black hair over her chest and shoulders. "I have my ways."

And I trust them. "See you there."

"Don't be late."

Momo stuck a string of gossamer to the ceiling and tugged off the ground. Minho ran the other way.

Kai's guards were like cop cars- they chose specific regions to patrol, and despite the possible thrill of the chase, were spectacularly bored with their jobs. Which meant Minho only had to stun about six of them on his way to the nearest air vent.

"Jesus *wept*," Minho cursed. The thing was the width of a cereal box. *This better fucking work.* With no other choice than to hope, he hauled himself up.

The vent was cramped, but not as stuffy as he'd feared. Even at this hour, he could pass through many interesting conversations (Minho

fucking *knew* that Chef couldn't have made that bread pudding) which he would take with him to the grave, along with the shuddering number of three separate dead mice he came across. Minho was going to take five showers the minute he escaped for good.

The network of tunnels was surprisingly similar to the blobs of rooms he and Momo had concocted. Especially considering- like a capital A-Asshole -Kai had reserved the entire front wing of the ship for himself. Just hit right, take another left, a long voyage onward, and boom- you were staring through the ceiling like some undercover maggot.

With Brutus and Ivan guarding Kai's room, there were no guards inside (*Nobody gets that privilege*, thought Minho with all the sarcasm in his half-deteriorated brain), leaving Momo, who'd no doubt by now crept in by sneaking over their heads on the domed, 'sticky,' according to her, ceiling, and slipping right through the door like she'd been invited.

Minho couldn't begin to make out her shape, but he could see Kai dozing peacefully in his expensive silk pajamas, beautiful in his sleep. *Clearly not losing any over the life he took just hours ago*. The peryton had simply been one of many.

And right there, above his unconscious head on a feather pillow, was his lamp on a pedestal. Minho almost cried right in that musty tunnel of darkness at the sight of it; it had been so many *years*. Who even knew how it looked now? *Hopefully Soonie, Doongie, and Dori won't be too mad at me*.

Limb by reedy, haunting, oddly elegant limb, Momo made her delicate descent from the ceiling, approaching Kai's sleeping form with tedious care. Now Minho couldn't cry if he wanted to.

If that bastard opened his eyes, moved, even *smelled* her, it would all be open for both of them. Their dreams crushed under the heel of a polished boot, their bodies tossed off the deck of the boat and

welcomed into the ocean unliving. Neither would get to take the first breath of freedom.

But then her fingers curled around the handle, lifted it off the pedestal. Kai didn't even *snore*.

Momo held it precious in both her hands, cupping it to her chest like a baby bird. She raised her head and, unmistakably, met his eyes in a nod. *You can come out now.*

He unhinged the grates with painstaking slowness, not risking a single creak. When Minhó's feet touched the carpeted floor, it was as if he was lighter than air. He grazed the cool metal and felt an unforgivable knot form in his throat. "Momo." He hadn't dared to believe they would get this far. "You *did* it."

"Told you we were getting out of here," she whispered, all eight of her eyes captivating his two and God. He believed it.

They took their first steps back up towards the grate together. His fingers had just barely grazed the hatch.

But the one thing neither had taken into account was just how goddamn old the ship of Amnesia was.

And the grate door fell to the ground with a clatter.

Minho stopped breathing. Momo's grip on the lamp steeled.

Kai, that incorrigibly light sleeper, stirred. Blinked. Opened his eyes.

"How do I put you in the lamp?" Momo whispered.

"Um. You." Minhó swallowed. "I have to touch it. The side."

Kai's mouth was opening. Minhó's hands were starting to shake. "Minho."

"Mo, I- I'm sorry-"

"Min."

She slapped his hand over the lamp; Minho's skin became unglued atoms that funneled into a golden tube, Kai yelled for Brutus, and Momo ran.

Minho's fall back into the lamp was too fast for the magical vessel to even comprehend- he was free falling from a spiraling rococo ceiling and it was the best feeling in the world, even when he hit the marble ground as a rolling stone.

There was no time to waste in celebration. *"Momo!"* He ran for the crux of the library, grabbed the telephone-slash-speaker which he'd never had a use for until now. "Can you hear me?"

"Way too well!" He could hear the sound of several speedy footfalls- spider legs could do that, Minho supposed. But they weren't just her's. "Are you okay?"

"Fuck- okay? I'm brilliant, I-" The echo of three incoming yowly voices punched his heart in the throat. "Oh. Oh my God."

"What?"

"It's- God. It's my cats. They're alive. They say hi."

"Good. Awesome. I'll take them out for tea."

Judging from what he could hear, Momo had spider-swung her way up the grand staircase and straight through the glass roof, pattering over the gymnasium and "- what the fuck is a Marconi room?" Pant, leap, land. "Never understood that name."

Minho laughed. "Don't think anyone does."

Another thump, roar of protestant wind- the storm was still going on. "Cleared the office quarters and bridge. Heading to the crow's nest right now."

Almost there. “And you see the speedboat?”

“Right where Dami left it- still a beauty.” Kai yelled out, something stupid like ‘*Get back here at once!*’ “Minho?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you sure you want me to do this?”

She knew she didn’t even have to ask- Minho never said a word he didn’t mean. *But she cares enough anyways.* Momo always cared. “I’m sure.”

“Okay.” A muttered raspy curse from her own breathless voice, another skittering jump off a ledge that brought her closer to the edge. “Will I ever see you again?”

“Of course you will. If you’re gonna travel the world, you might as well catch me washing up somewhere.”

A damp, sweet laugh. “I’ll give you that postcard then.” The shouts were gaining, Kai with them, but he could feel her holding on. “Goodbye, Minho.”

Thank you. “Goodbye, Momo.”

The very last thing Minho heard was Kai’s unholy scream cussed out by the jorogumo herself, who launched her body over the rail, onto the speedboat, and chucked his lamp into the ocean as hard as she could.

Everything else staticked out, clogged by saltwater, but he could hear the motor revving, speeding off, taking Momo away for good.

The meows reached his ears in body form, and one by one, the unholy trinity showed their faces. “Oh, my loves.” Minho scooped all of them up at once, all their claws and their sandpaper tongues and clingy fur tufts. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. But I’m here now. I’m all right.”

And he was. Even though he could see the lights dimming ever so slightly from the effect of the deep. Even though he'd left the only friend he'd ever had in the middle of the West Pacific Ocean, and he was again alone. *Alone but free.* "Everything's gonna be alright now."

GRRRLS - AViVA

*White magnolia: purity and perfection.

*Mariquil- lovely little one-word witchy spell to get someone to stop in their tracks.

*Blood on the Risers - U.S. Paratroopers

pov

Chapter 14: pov

Very much a mood dampener, I know. But with this chapter, I hope to make it up to you with a little bit of Skz present and MinChan past, and just how the then's reflecting on the now.

I wanna love me,

The way that you love me,

Oh, for all of my pretty, and all of my ugly too,

I'd love to see me from your point of view...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

A week with Twice felt like summertime- a break away from the real world, a time of beauty and bliss and laughter and nothing more.

Once they'd done a successful enough job of convincing Dahyun *not* to let Jeongin not to log-roll all the way down the hill, it was deemed safe enough for everyone to go out into the backyard to shoot the breeze, enjoy the view, enjoy a day with people they rarely got to see.

"And *this* here is someone I found rooting through the rose moss two years back." Sana coaxed the lop-eared rabbit out of the backyard bushes, holding her up for Hyunjin to see. "Meet Luea."

Hyunjin made the immediate noise of a being who'd found something they'd be willing to protect with their entire lives. "She *doesn't* look like she would use my hair for a nest!"

"Mina got mad at her for eating her barberry once, but other than that she's been an angel." Hyunjin lifted her drooping ears and let them fall, giggling as she wrinkled her nose at him. "You don't get a lot of rabbits in Portland, do you?"

"Nah, mostly jackalopes. This one time, I found one with a whole clove of garlic in the pantry."

"I've heard a lot about them. Are they friendly?"

"Oh, hell no- it headbutted my leg. Very pointy antlers," Hyunjin replied, still smiling at the rabbit. "Thankfully, Kkami's made me used to it."

Over by the patio, Jisung, after discovering Nayeon's banshee capabilities, had decided to see just how trustworthy she was with rock genres.

"Nirvana?" he quizzed.

"Alternative." she answered.

"Artic Monkeys?"

"Indie."

"Joy Division?"

"Post punk. Give me something hard."

"That's what-"

"-she said." Jaws dropped in unison. Finger guns met at the barrel.
"Yooooo-"

"Seriously," Changbin went on. "I cannot be the only person who finds it weird that the same people who created shit like Scotch eggs and fucking Jaffa Cakes only have three flavors of ice cream. You're with me on this, right?"

"Ride or die," Jihyo grunted, whapping at the dummy Mina had enchanted to life so she had someone to practice her swordfighting drills on.

"And there's not even Neapolitan- just chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla all on their own. No creativity- fuckers literally put *beans* on fucking *toast*."

Jihyo countered deftly, swung her blade wide and hard.
"Astonishing."

"We need Adam Young and his friends to be dropped into this world. If there's anyone I'm going to trust to fix their country, it's the Antichrist."

The valkyrie impaled and beheaded her opponent with two killing blows- deadly even with a tourney sword. "Who better?"

Meanwhile, in a circle of lawn chairs around a lattice table: "Are you serious?" asked Seungmin.

"Of course," Jeongyeon replied, stabbing her fork into the pancake bread loaf. "After the hurricane, the kit couldn't transform all the way until he was seventeen- four years after."

"Just because we're born in fox form, doesn't mean it comes naturally," Jeongin added, stealing her bite.

"But I thought- I didn't- I never knew that could've been the reason."

"Everyone's had bad shit happen to them in their pasts- we just take it in differently." Not looking down, Jeongyeon knocked her brother's fork away. "Maybe if you get back to the root of how it made you feel, you could finally take that next step."

"She's not lying- she doesn't spare anyone the truth." Jeongin pointed his utensil at Seungmin. "So you better start eating if you want this."

"I *would*, if you'd give me back my fork."

On the beach folding chairs sat three acai bowls, one cheerful bulldog mug of dark red, and a very surly discussion topic.

"I know the mythology books have never been too accurate," Chan started, gesturing with his mug, "but bear with us here."

"Can you actually take your eyes out of your head?" Minho asked for him. "Really, it would explain a lot."

Momo's shoulders shook violently as she laughed. Tzuyu glared. "No, I *can't*. Alright? I'm not gonna be fucking *bullied* for it."

"I was simply looking for an explanation as to how you managed to kill that mosquito without looking over your shoulder."

"Just because you didn't hear it doesn't mean I couldn't!"

"But you *did* tell me that one time you wished you could eat a child," Momo pointed out helpfully.

Tzuyu smacked her arm. "One time, one incident with those Girl Scouts. Unfortunately, my ancestors left that bit out."

"Fortunately for us," said Minho, "murder is a natural cause of death."

And through that paradise, a frantic Mina came crashing through the trees with Felix's arm draped over her shoulders just as Chaeyoung and Dahyun came walking in with two chocolate croissants. "Guys!"

"Shit," Dahyun whispered, plate slipping from her fingers as they joined both covens in rushing to their aid.

No sooner than Mina set Felix's back against a tree trunk had Changbin dropped to his side; one hand at his pulse and the other cupping his face.

"Felix. Hey. Come on, open your eyes, look at me. *Do something.*" He searched the angel's faintly stirring face for any signs of life. In a panicked, low-toned plea, the demon whispered, "Talk to me, baby, *please.*"

Chaeyoung heard. "Did he just call him-"

"*Shh,*" Seungmin hissed.

"What happened?" Chan asked. There were cuts along both of their arms, the gash running down Felix's calf still bleeding.

"We were just in the woods," Mina rambled, absently pulling a twig out of her ponytail. "He was helping me gather, when- when we were attacked."

"By what?" demanded Jihyo.

"Chupacabras- four. Nobody local, by the looks of them. Felix put himself in front of me- I tried to help him- we managed to fend them off, but-" Tzuyu touched her shoulder, squeezed it as she settled by her side. "I don't even know how they got onto the premises."

Momo touched the burn mark on the side of her neck. "Did you see anything off about them?" Minho prompted. "Was there a sigil?"

The frenetic energy stilled from the implication. Mina wilted a little, like one of the flowers in her garden. "Everything happened so fast. I-I didn't get to see it clearly, but there might've been."

Chaeyoung took out her sketchpad and pencil, passed it down to her. "What did you see?"

Shakily, Mina accepted it, tracing the pencil through jutting straight lines, ending in two curves. "Something like this."

She handed it up to Jisung, who turned the pad towards Momo and Minho. If the color draining from their faces was anything, it might as well have drained the summer out of the whole afternoon.

"*Shit*," Momo breathed out.

Jihyo's jaw set in steel. Summoning her sword, she sliced the sleeve of her hoodie, ripped it off, and bent down to tie it around Felix's leg. "Changbin, you get the angel. Mina, I saw that limp, Chaeyoung's going with you." She straightened back up, sheathed the blade with a flourish. "Let's take this to the healing ward."

The others branched back to give them some room- Chaeyoung helping the sorceress follow Jihyo up the path and Changbin sweeping Felix into his arms, laughing out a sigh of relief when he started to blink his eyes open. "Oh, thank *Hell*."

"What happened," Felix murmured, slowly coming back to life. "Mina, is she-"

"Mina's okay. She got you here safe- we're just going to the apothecary now. Don't worry about it, okay? I got you."

"Okay..."

The apothecary ward was a tranquil area, pastel blue-green walls and drawn lavender curtains from high windows obviously designed to bring someone peace and comfort while they healed in a bed with an actually decent mattress. However, no one could actually focus on that when Tzuyu and Jeongyeon were barging in with armfuls of tinctures and salves that they only hoped were the ones Mina told them to get, Mina wincing as Chaeyoung dabbed a soaked cotton ball over her cuts, Felix squeezing the blood out of Jisung's hand while Chan sewed the gash in his leg shut.

Jihyo, who'd ripped the second sleeve off her hoodie because just having one looked weird, was patrolling circles in front of the rolling whiteboard she'd brought in, twirling a dry-erase marker between her fingers. All that had been drawn was the sigil Mina had seen and Minho and Momo had confirmed as the one they had been dreading.

"Are we not even safe here anymore?" Sana rambled; red columbines* were popping up in her hair. "They got past the barriers, through the forest- I didn't even *feel* it!"

"It's not your fault," Dahyun assured her, plucking them out as soon as they bloomed. "The guy's a warlock- he could've done anything to hide them."

"And we're sure nobody got bit?" Hyunjin paced between beds, both of their occupants shaking their heads. "Because if *that* happened, you guys would get infected, and if you were infected you would die, and if you *died*-"

"Nobody's dying, Hyunjin," Changbin said, handing Chan a roll of bandages. "And if we are, it's not gonna be like this."

"Should've known a week was too good," Seungmin muttered.

"Who knows what else he's got in store?" Nayeon exclaimed.

"Maybe it was only a matter of time before he showed up," Momo contemplated grimly.

"What do we do?" Jeongin whimpered, head in hands.

"We stop fucking panicking, that's what."

Minho was leaning back near the farthest window, silhouette illuminated, overseeing them. Everyone watched as he pushed off the wall and strode to the center of the room.

"We do what we should've done ages ago," he continued, voice steady and bitter with years of bottled-up resentment. "We end this son of a fuck for good."

"What?" Chan whispered, horrified.

"*What?*" Nayeon enunciated even louder. "Minho, that attack was just four guys. Do you even see the members of our coven?"

"That's *all* I see," Minho spat back, the venom in his voice dripping through the floorboards. "That's what I let happen because I chose to be afraid instead of fight back. And I'll be damned if it happens again."

"Minho, literally *none* of this is your fault," Chan attempted.

"It might as well be."

"He could've found my location," Momo offered. "We don't know it's you he sent the hit on."

"You've been safe for this long. I show my face for a week, and this shit happens. You weren't the one thing that could give him everything he ever wanted- there's no other reason there could be." Minho was on a roll now- it was all pouring out. "The night of our escape, we were too scared to do it. Fuckface was *asleep*, with no guards, no magic, nothing that could have stopped us. And even before that, we had a million chances- every time he turned his back, came too close, let his guard down because he thought we were just two more soldiers cowed into submission, that he'd gotten to us, because that was what we *were*. But we're not those beings anymore. We *can't* be. Not when there's a second fucking chance right in front of us, and we've still got a vengeance after all these years." In the afternoon sunlight, Minho was incandescent. "I'm *done* letting Kai scare me. I'm done with him hurting the ones I care about. And I'm done hiding away from all of it- if I've got one shot, one say in the matter, I'm landing the killing blow myself. I don't care if anyone else is with me. I'm just fucking *done*."

The silence hung in the air with the scent of cinnamon, honeysuckle, and budding determination.

"Well," said Momo, "if that's your big idea, I'm not gonna let you kick his ass on your own."

"What she said," chimed Chaeyoung. "I'm in."

"A good excuse as any to get out of the house," Tzuyu caved.

"Is this this really happening?" Felix asked Jisung.

Jisung shrugged. "I mean, I fucking guess."

"Dope."

"Anything for the love of sweet, sweet vengeance," agreed Changbin.

"And chaos," piped Jeongin. He slapped the air high-five the demon sent his way.

Chan seemed to be the only one holding on to some shred of sanity. "We can't just decide on this right away."

"He's right," said Jihyo.

"Thank-"

"We need a plan."

"That is *not* what I meant."

"He might've been able to find us, but I'm not sure if there's a surefire way to find him as easily," said Jeongyeon. "Chupacabra tracks aren't the most dependable."

"And they could've been sent to some other location to save face," added Sana.

"If it took him a week to find us, it could take us the same amount of time or longer to find him," Seungmin put in. "For all we know, he might not even be in Colorado."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," murmured Tzuyu, her eyes on a laptop no one had seen her get out.

"Are going to elaborate, or just leave us hanging?" asked Nayeon.

"Come see for yourselves."

It was hard to figure out just how seventeen people managed to fit on and around one hospital bed (Dahyun tossed Felix a crutch to give him a hand) but it worked. "What the hell's ScreaM?" asked Hyunjin. "Not a cool punk show, I'm guessing?"

"Unfortunately, no," murmured Minho. "I can't believe he still does this."

Momo peered closer at the screen. "What's Seamus Quincy Blackstone doing on *Reddit* with this invite?"

Tzuyu shrugged. "Warlock incels."

"What even is it?" asked Chan.

"It's this thing that Kai's done whenever he needs more ammunition to his cause," Momo explained. "It's usually this big party-slash-recruitment to attract more monsters into his ranks and patrons. Basically a way to get more people to suffer his bullshit."

"How you've never said anything about it?" asked Felix, gesturing to her and Minho, the Spartacus twins of people who'd suffered Kai's bullshit.

"Well." Momo flicked a quick glance at Minho. "He'd been mooching off people for enough years to be well off enough for the 30's, so. We kinda missed it."

Chaeyoung pointed. "Ha. Losers."

Having picked up the pointer from Stray Kids, Jihyo called, "Hit," and the empousa was whapped with a pillow off the bed.

"So, when and where is this happening?" questioned Seungmin. "Is there a date to go off of?"

"Actually, yes," answered Tzuyu, scrolling down. "It's in the Grand Junction, other side of the Book Cliffs away from town. Which just happens to be forty-five minutes away from here."

"If that fucker's rich enough to rent the whole Colorado Monument," conceded Jisung. "I'll use it as an incentive."

"I'll take that up too," Mina agreed.

"Are we sure that this is the only way we can get back at him?" Chan asked.

Out of all the eyes that turned on him, Minho's were the ones that burned the most. "This is the *only* way."

"We've got a time, place, and a whole lot of rage," Jihyo concluded. "A stable basis for a game plan."

DubChaeng, those gremlins were practically shaking with anticipation. "Does that mean-"

"Get the planning room ready- blueprints, pens, and a whole lot of coffee and brain food. We're gonna fuck this guy up properly. Make sure he stays down."

Over the whoops of approval and readiness, Minho was still staring at Chan. "Couldn't agree more."

While the rest of the gang was on their way upstairs, Chan pulled him back, two fingers to the back of his elbow. "Hey. So. All that." Awkward gesture at the door. "Back there. Was that... planned? Intended?"

"No," Minho replied tersely. "But it was bound to happen, wasn't it?"

"Was it?" His eyes flashed in an irritated roll. "I mean, I know the others kinda hyped it up."

"This has nothing to do with them."

“And I know how you get when you’re pissed off, but *this*- we need more time to think about this, what it could mean.”

“What more is there to think about? I’ve been wanting to do this for years, Chan- I could get him out of my life for *good*.”

“Yes, and I want that for you, you *know* I do, but.” Chan paused, choosing his next words with care. “I don’t know if you’re in the right headspace for this.”

Minho rounded on him. “*What?*”

“Minho, we’ve been here a week- I don’t blame you for being scared-“

“I’m not fucking *scared*-“

“It’s okay to be.” Chan stepped closer; had anyone else done it, they would’ve been scorched through every organ in their body. “I just don’t want you to regret-“

“Don’t try to talk me out of this.”

“If you got hurt-“

“I’m out of my lamp now. He can’t do that.”

“He could still do *something*. You said it yourself, Minho. Now that he knows you’re here, he’s not going to let you out of his sight. If something were to happen to you, to *anyone*, I wouldn’t-“

“*Nothing* is going to happen,” Minho cut him off harshly. “That’s why I’m doing this- so nothing will happen. This isn’t just for revenge.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Think about our family. Our friends. It’s so they don’t get hurt either.” A step into Chan’s space. “Do you think I’d be able to forgive myself if I let anything happen to *you*?”

"I just-"

"Stop worrying about me."

"You know you can't ask that." Minho sighed through his nose. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

His fingertips grazed Chan's jaw, a frail caress, before they slipped into his pockets, hidden behind Minho turning his back.

"For the first time, I do. And for *once*, I just wish you'd believe me."

Stung, Chan reached out. "Min-"

"Stop. It's fine, alright, just. Stay out of my way. Let me do this." A shaking hand unfurled on the banister, tracked it's way up. "I know what I'm doing."

I wish I could believe you, Chan thought, watching him ascend, too afraid to mess up more by following.

Past - 1946

In Minho and Chan's time together, they had dabbled in a special kind of experimenting.

Platonic, first and foremost, stubbornly so. It wasn't like there was room for much else when they were trying to run a motel, adapt to the changing world, *and* conspire new methods to bring a djinn freedom.

They'd stayed up for days, sometimes weeks trying new ways to make it happen. The drawing board Chan had brought into existence two years before had been scribbled over and erased so many times they'd come to lose count, covers of heavy ancient tomes holding even older spells thrown to the floor, even the greatest of experts

from far and wide coming up with no way to help them- it was simply impossible.

"I've told you before, it's *hopeless*," Minho raved, kicking another book to the ground. "Every time we convince ourselves we've even come *close*, we're proved wrong."

"It's just because we haven't found the right way yet," Chan reminded him, picking it back up. "There's still more out there that we haven't tried."

"Then *stop* fucking trying! *That* would be more helpful than the goose chase we're on."

"*Hey.*"

Chan fixed him with that little divot in his brow, not angry, never impatient. "Are you mad at me?"

Minho shut his mouth, jaw set in a pout when he muttered, "No."

"Then don't take it out on me. I know you're frustrated- I am too. But we can't give up when we don't know how close we are." A comforting squeeze of the hand. "You're gonna be free. *We're* gonna make that happen, no matter what we have to do."

A glance at the hand that held his, the begrudging smile that always split through. "Alright."

"Besides, at least we know not to set the lamp on fire."

"Never want to feel that again."

No matter how many times they failed, Chan refused to give up. Even when they reached the end of the book stack that Yerin had recommended or downed that whole jug of elixir and came back with nothing but severe hangover symptoms. He insisted there was always something new- there had to be, in a world this big and relentless. If it was out there for them, they could reach out and grab

it and see what good it could do. And when someone was that hopeful, Minho didn't see the harm in believing he could be too.

Of course, experimenting wasn't all they did- that would just be too tiring. In the free time they stole, they simply lived like any other couple of bachelors would. Chatted with friends they invited over, helped out motel guests, saw Notorious in the theater for the first time, drank small doses of Jamie's moonshine in the afternoons, playing with the unholy trinity on the couch, laughing when Chan sneezed at too much cat hair. It was times like those where both him and Minho would forget what it was they were trying to accomplish, forget the positions they were supposed to have, and just enjoy being around each other.

Which, as they would often remember, they shouldn't have been doing in the first place. Not when they didn't know what would happen.

It would be easier, Minho would think, walking into the lobby to tell Chan good night, only to find him dozing over a desk full of rune leaflets and open books with the lamp still on, *if he wasn't someone I liked so much.*

A million times a day, Chan would think the same thing. It would really be helpful if Minho simply was still a hot, selfish asshole he didn't understand as much as he did. Getting him out of that lamp without the whole halfway-in-love-with-the-subject thing in the way would really be super.

Except the thing was. He wasn't even sure if it was halfway anymore. Neither of them was.

It was a thing they ranted about to Sana and Momo for nights on end, an example of many being:

"At first I started flirting with him only as a joke," Minho was saying. "Momo. I don't think it's a joke anymore."

"Jesus *Christ*."

They could be business partners, roommates, even friends, that was fine. Not of that entailed admiring an infuriatingly touchable nose-to-mouth ratio as someone, filled out another notebook, or cackling at every terrible pun made over dinner, or singing along to Ella Fitzgerald's greatest hits just because you liked the sound of his voice with yours.

Or imagining what it would be like if the beds they went back to at night weren't empty on the other side; filled with lazy moonlit smiles that whispered a name into a permanent silver frame, warm hands and a body that wouldn't be gone in the morning, charging the air with static and a want so bad it buried itself in their bones so hard it felt like they'd crack.

That wouldn't work at *all*.

But hey. They could compartmentalize. Minho had spent all his life in a hunk of metal. Chan had become equal parts dead and alive not even halfway through his twenties. They'd accustomed to that as normal. They could look each other in the eye and pretend their hearts didn't do things so big and loud that the rest of their bodies couldn't hold the sound. Easy.

Which meant, of course, when the whole thing came crashing down, it exploded all over them.

There was this kelpie girl Lauren- new to Eldritch, staying in room 22 -who had a thing for Chan. Which was fine, literally who didn't? The guy was loved by everyone he ever met. Save for the fact that it was the kind of thing that sent her asking for directions to every place in town and *no*, that was *not* a new flannel, he'd worn it two weeks ago. If she was going to ask him out, she might as well get it over with.

Except she wasn't. Which meant Minho was doing room checks while she talked him into another stupid, giggly laugh on the courtyard couch at nearly six 'o clock.

"So you've been running this place all on your own since 1933?" asked Lauren, who'd apparently run short on fresh material.

"Yeah. Well- not completely on my own. I got Minho here to help me."

He spared a gesture up behind them. Genially, Minho waved. She didn't even look up.

"I'd assume it's hard," Lauren went on sympathetically. "I mean, especially with this economy- this place must be barely skating by."

"Actually, we're doing well. Resources are a bit tough to come by, but somebody always ends up spotting us through the trees. I mean, you got here."

"Only because I mixed up Cedar Mill with Cedar Hills. What kind of klutz does that?"

Only three other customers we've got here, Minho thought, folding up the bedding to another room. *Don't think you're special.*

But she was already moving on. "Owning a motel isn't typical vampire profession, I've gotta say."

"Nor did I ever see myself doing it in the beginning," Chan admitted. "But it's become a lot more about the people than about me. You get to help someone new every time."

"That's so *sweet*."

Another stupid giggly laugh. "It isn't, really."

"All the *stars*," Minho muttered. If he had to listen to this any longer, he'd wish his own ears off his head. A meow from below- Soonie had appeared at his feet. "I know, I know, they're still at it. It's insufferable." Another meow: *That's not what I meant*. "Well, don't go and tell me you *like* her- you stole one of her stockings just three days ago."

Louder meow from inside the open door to 15- Doongie was sitting on the countertop. "Oh, no. Don't you dare say that. I am *not* jealous." Momo was the one who had brought up the prospect when he'd called her up about it. "I haven't yet sunk that low."

Dori slunk past his leg with a low mrowl. "What does *that* have to do with anything? Just because I'm here doesn't mean any devolution- I *chose* to stay with Chan." Something else like: *exactly*. "Shut up- you three latched onto him before I ever did. Quit acting like you blame me." Then, just to add on: "Besides, if he *does* like her, it'll be good for him. Something to take his mind off helping me."

Soonie pawed at his pant leg; obligingly, he picked her up. "I know," he whispered. "I know it won't help how I feel. But I can't think about that." Another laugh, drawn out from a half-confident joke. "Maybe it'd be for the best."

Lauren passed him to her own room, red hair bouncing behind her, self-satisfied smile not leaving her face as she shut the door. When Minho reached the ground level from the stairs again, Chan was dusting off his seat on the couch, running his curls back. "She likes you, y'know."

He'd thought it was common knowledge, but Chan choked on it halfway through. "W-What?"

"Come on- no one needs to ask where Aisling is three times, not if you've met Ronan. She's talked to you every day she's been here, laughs at all your jokes. It's obvious."

"You laugh at my jokes."

I'm not nearly the best example. "Bold of you to assume those were all genuine laughs," Minho lied. "Why not shoot your shot? It's not like she'll say no."

"I don't-" Chan's face flushed, tore away from his. "It's nothing, alright? It doesn't matter."

The girl herself threw open the door, changed into a green afternoon dress supposedly to bring out her eyes. "Well, I'm off to dinner," she announced. "I suppose I'll see you later tonight?"

"Y-Yeah-"

"He would join you, but I'm keeping him here to help with maintenance," Minho took over smoothly. "Motel things. You know how it is."

Lauren's brows had lifted, both in surprise and pleasure. "Yeah," she said, eyes flashing down to Chan, who was still struggling to pick his jaw up off the floor. "All right then. I'll set a table for next time."

Gliding down the stairs, she flounced off to the door, throwing the vampire a smile over her shoulder. "Bye, you two," she singsonged, and shut it.

Chan whirled back to him fuming. "What the *hell* was that?"

"You're welcome."

"What do you mean, 'you're welcome?' I didn't ask you to do that!"

"You didn't have to. It was clear enough to see, so I made it happen."

"I didn't *want* you to make anything happen. I don't even like her!"

Minho tamped down smolders of relief into the dirt. "You don't?"

"I literally *just* told you that."

"I thought you were just embarrassed."

"Well, you know what's gonna be embarrassing? Shooting her down when she comes back."

"Batting off the suitors by the dozens- I'm sure you're used to it by now," Minho teased. "Please, you didn't even notice until five

seconds ago- you're so dense I had to tell you."

But Chan wasn't letting it go this time. "*I'm* the dense one," he repeated, incredulous and empty in the shake of his head. "Unbelievable."

He spun on his heel for the main room- Minho followed swiftly behind.

"What're you so mad about?" he asked, chasing him down. "All you'll have to do is talk to her afterwards."

"It isn't about that."

"Then what?" Minho almost stepped forward, but the tiny flinch of Chan's hand set him to a stop. They were never going to repeat that day in 1944- the crack in the wall was still there as a reminder. "I'm sorry, okay, just... what?"

Chan sighed, long and heavy. When he pivoted, his eyes were facing the ground. "I didn't ask you to do anything."

"And I didn't ask you to try and get me out from an eternity of art deco architecture, but here we are." A puff of laughter, another run-through of those curls. "You've been so focused on helping me."

His hand hung around the base of his neck, rubbing the space there. "I appreciate the concern, but it's fine."

"You say that to *everything*. I've seen you asleep at the desk three times this week- you don't have to work so hard all the time."

"I don't mind it, really, I don't. And you know I don't need that much sleep- I'm basically nocturnal."

"I don't want you to care so much about me." *Well-* "You can do what you want."

Chan's face fell with every word. "You... don't?"

"I don't, okay? I know what you're trying to do for me, but- Chan, you have a *life*."

"I-I know that-"

"I'm not some case to be solved."

"I never said you were!"

"Then how come you haven't even seen Jamie in days?"

"She'll visit *me*, sometimes! Why's it any of your business?"

"Well, I'm fucking *sorry* if I'm trying to be a friend who cares. What's your problem? You were the one who said you wanted to go out and meet people."

"Because I've been *trying* to get over *you*!"

A grenade dropped, but didn't explode. The whole world hit a record scratch.

Chan was faced fully towards him, mouth still open around words he wished he could take back, eyes unable to close on the effect they were taking.

Minho reacted to them one at a time. "I'm sorry," he stammered, for the first time in his boundless life. "Get over... *me*?"

Chan's shoulders slumped. "Yes." Everything about him was desperate not to shrink under the weight of what was happening. "Yes, okay, *you*. Are you really gonna tell me you're that surprised?"

"Why the fuck *wouldn't* I be, I..." *I never imagined you would*. "I had no idea."

A beat. Suddenly Chan felt close to hysterical. "Are you kidding me?"

"What kind of question is that- no, I'm not *kidding*."

"Oh." In a faint, subdued, funeral-reading tone he said, "Shit."

Shit. What else could be right? What else could encapsulate such an entirely shattering moment in one all-consuming word? Who was there to even know?

"When..." Minho managed; all four letters grew to the size of the dining table. "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"I never thought you'd want to know." Chan's hands didn't feel right in his pockets- they couldn't fit into a fist, behind his back, anywhere. "What would you even *think*, that these past years, that's why I've been helping you?"

"Well. Isn't that why?"

"No! I mean- I wasn't- I-I didn't." Finally, his hands fell to his sides. One came to grip the corner of the table, and he analyzed the veins. "I didn't mean to," Chan confessed quietly. "I tried not to, I did. It was never supposed to be an issue. I mean, when I first met you, I couldn't have imagined it. Now..." One shaky free hand gestured at the air between them. "I wanted just to get over it- before you found out, or before I did anything stupid or selfish."

"You've never been selfish a day in your life."

"And you have no idea how untrue that is."

"Chan-"

"*You don't know,*" he repeated, voice shaking with the tremor of a broken shadow. "I gave you a bloody *room*. I've kept you here at this motel, in this town, in my head, everywhere I go. I haven't even tried to stay away." He looked at Minho like it was killing him all over again, draining the life from his veins and freezing his heart. "Every chance I've ever been given, I've only come closer. Just so I could know more- just so you could think good of me, think I'm better than what I am. There's nothing more selfish than that."

"Then why have you been helping me?"

"Because it means," Chan said, his voice hoarse. "I can spend another day with you."

All the moments came reeling back in slow motion- every nervous laugh, every new experiment, every look that lingered too long. *You*, Chan said. Only *you*. "Why didn't you make a wish?"

"What would that have done?"

A wish, Minho had learned, could do anything. "You can't make anyone fall in love," he said quietly, "but obedience is allowed. Kai used to do it all the time." Kai, a power-hungry vulture with a rotten apple core for a heart who couldn't be fucked to develop a sense of empathy for anything.

Chan, who still loved like a mortal and hadn't let all the time in the world take his kind soul, looked heartbroken, terrified at the prospect. "If that's what I'd have to do to make you feel something for me, I'd never even consider it."

"Oh-" Minho could have crumbled right there. *Shit*. "Chan, that isn't what I-"

"Don't explain. It's- it's fine." His tone wavered on stilts over a chasm, wobbling as he swallowed something hard. "If you want to leave, I'll understand, just- know that I won't stop trying to free you."

With every answer Minho got, each one made less sense. *I haven't given anything to deserve this- I haven't served my purpose to him in years*. "Why?"

A scoff. "Do you want me to tell you again?"

"Not *that*." He just needed to hear it, loud and clear. "Why do you care so much about me?"

Five feet away from him, Chan could only stare.

"Because I didn't know what I was looking for until I met you."

And he went on, he had *more* than just that- a whole spiel on his ridiculous suits, and pretty hair, and even worse sense of humor becoming the best part of his day -but Minho couldn't even hear it beyond the demon in his head, swirling silver magic that fogged up his thoughts with a voice who hadn't left him with the storm in 1938, a voice that had been rocking in the waves which no amount of liquor had ever been able to drown out.

"*Oh, Minho,*" he crooned, laughing at his softness. "*Don't you know he's lying? You were broken long before you even met him- can't even put the pieces back together.*"

"*NOBODY WANTS YOU.*"

"- and I know, that this isn't ideal for so many reasons, and I really, *really* wanted a better way to tell you, but-"

"Shut up."

Chan couldn't even finish his confused little 'what' before Minho crossed all five feet in two swift strides and shoved his back hard against the wall.

"Fucking *shut up*, and stop *lying to me*," he seethed angrily into Chan's wide, astonished eyes, hands fisted in the collar of his flannel. "I fucking *know* you are."

His voice quavered at the end. A sniff hitched unforgivably through heavy breathing, clenched growl already tasting the salt of his own burning tears. "You have to be lying, so..." Another sniff. Minho was never going to let himself live it down. "Stop it."

For the first time ever, Chan was seeing him; it had been a long time coming- little by little, starting with stripping the armor of his blazers, his sarcasm, fading out every other fabricated wall of false brilliance. *Every chance I've ever been given, I've only come closer. Just so I*

could know more- just so you could think good of me, think I'm better than what I am. The vampire was right- there was nothing more selfish than that.

Tentatively, breath ghosting over Minho's lips, Chan lifted a hand- not to strike him, not to push him off -but to swipe the tear out of his eye with the pad of his thumb, stay his hand to brush over his cheek. There had never been a gaze so forgiving.

Minho had been faced with torture, cruel black diamonds, choices he never got to make that always ended in cuts and bruises inside and out, biting the bullet through all of them. Somehow, all of that paled in comparison to this. *This*, he thought, eyes flicking down to Chan's mouth, soft in smiles and in sorrow, Chan's free hand splayed at his side, not even trying to push him away; his own hands whose grip hadn't loosened. *This is how I'll die.*

Minho tore them away, shoved him uselessly back, breath coming quick and heavy, and retreated, wiping the tears out of his eyes, using what little magic he had left to his own devices to blink into his own bedroom.

Not that it did any good. Before he even closed the door, grazed the bedpost, Chan was right there, the shadows from which he'd come whispering his arrival.

He froze at the sight of Minho, unsure of what to do now that he was with him. "Do you want me to-"

"No." Chan resigned himself to sitting on the black loveseat he'd used to travel. "Some deal this turned out to be."

"Yeah," he muttered bleakly; a far cry from the laughter they'd shared the day they'd agreed to start over, not knowing they'd end up exactly where they'd feared. "Minho?"

"What?"

"I'm ready to make my second wish."

The djinn almost burst out laughing; what came out was an abraded scoff. "Now?"

"Yeah." Gulp. "We don't have to if-"

"Just say it."

Given permission, he was even more hesitant. The vampire ducked his head like a turtle in his shell, face hued a vibrant shade of red. In barely more than a breath, a flooding whisper, he blurted-

"I wish you would kiss me."

Minho's mind went searingly blank.

Chan sat there, still as a cricket caught by silence, hunched like he was trying to make himself disappear, the blush on his face shifting somewhere between shame and hesitance, apprehension, the way he'd looked staring up at Minho after he'd fought off those two hunters- a man who didn't know how to ask for forgiveness he'd already earned. *And because he doesn't know, he makes a wish because he believes he'll never make it real any other way.*

It wasn't puppet strings or any kind of compulsion that drew Minho forward, settled him into the spot next to Chan; the stars had never had their hand in that matter.

There were a million ways he could have gone about it, a million places he could imagine landing one. The line of Chan's collarbone where his rumpled shirt had slipped down. The pulse in his throat marked by two puncture wounds. The hinge of his jaw, slope of his cheekbone, bridge of his nose. Anywhere and everywhere.

But Minho knew what he'd meant, knew what he'd thought when he'd heard the word *kiss*. Even this close, Chan still refused to look at him, expecting a reprimanding. Gently as he could without

trembling, Minho tipped his head up to look him in the eye, thumb and forefingers on his chin. *Look at me.*

Chan didn't dare blink, dare breathe; if he moved an inch, his fingers would brush the hand Minho had rested upon the loveseat. As the other spread open to catch the space below his cheekbone - which he did *not* have to do - Chan could have sworn he felt the murmur of a heart that had long since ceased in beating. Absurdly, he wondered if he could take the wish back. But it had already been released into sound form, mistake already made. He'd already cheated death one time; if there was any way he was going to survive this, he didn't know it.

A kiss, nothing more, just the *one* - and neither were sure if they could even survive it.

But it was Minho who leaned in, Chan who shut his eyes in time to feel close of the distance.

The first touch was temperate as the brush of a moth's wing, shy and delicate, the gradual, steady warmth of a summer day spreading through them. Knees bumped slightly into a soft slide of lips, sweet as first rain, two immortals trying their best as one did in a nervous first kiss.

It was Chan who remembered the wish, breaking off as Minho pressed for more. When their eyes opened, they blinked in belated surprise and drew back, like waking from a dream in a reality they couldn't remember. Slowly, their gazes panned down, finding the spot where Chan had threaded his fingers through Minho's, dewy coral vines coiling around each other, timidly flowering into bloom, unwilling to let go.

They met again in a spark of intent, sharp as flint, confirmation to what they'd been wondering for years. The breeze had already blown, bolt of lightning shot through an approaching twilight sky. But neither had even heard, even noticed, even *cared*. A new strike was building up, alert and spectral and already taking shape.

When they connected, it split the world in half.

Their bolt struck a storm into the ground, blooming fissures and landscapes and whole disasters that erupted in the press of Chan's palms into the curves of Minho's waist, holding him tight and fiercely, the djinn's fingers mapping out landmarks in his dimples and cheeks, turning the rain into a downpour because it was real, real for both of them, real and bigger than a wish, bigger than magic, bigger than entire population of Eldritch. One kiss never could have been enough.

Under silken fingertips, they made for each other their own soft universe, a shelter and a cyclone, made of the gentility and warmth and voltage they had never known they wanted, needed, craved, lips moving in vibrant synchrony. Chan moved his hand to the small of Minho's back, pulled him arching into the space where their legs now overlapped, the other bracketing below his shoulder blade. Minho returned the favor by pushing his hands into his curls, living in the soft, lush, feel of them and the reaction it drew: a gasp, an invitation for more. The taste they encountered through it was syrupy sweet, a drop of nectar on their tongues, constant and irresistible in only the way the most impossible person you've ever met could be, and all they could do was revel in it, wonder why they had spent so long running belligerent circles around one another when they could've been doing *this* instead.

There was no wish in the world that could have granted the feeling of *finally*, of blossoming lightning storms and miracles that came undone beneath your hands, the dazzle and burn of touch that had been kept far too long restrained, keeping their arms wrapped around each other without fear of having to letting go because- they realized, as they pulled apart -they didn't.

Chan didn't completely open his eyes at first; he'd been focused on Minho's lips, parted and gasping and dark pink from his. The only thought he could derive from that was *wow*. "You okay?"

Minho eyes landed on Chan's face before his, on the cuffs around his wrists, where they ended nearly brushing Chan's untidy curls, the arms around him cradling him so close he could hardly breathe. "I..." he started, swallowing dryly, closing his eyes so he didn't have to see him go. "I'm sorry."

"Min- Minho, *wait-*"

But his corporeal form faded from his grasp, left Chan with nothing but lavender and sugar scented smoke.

Present

Night had fallen, and Jihyo had sent her makeshift cavalry to their rooms. "We've got a lot of training to do in the morning to get this plan to work," she'd said, armful of rolled up blueprints covered in scribbles of brainstorm and red pen.

Minho thought of Felix's bone-crushing grip on Jisung's hand as his calf was sewn shut, Chan's wary gaze following him up the stairs. *It has to work.*

Despite having been in the same room for the planning itself, Chan hadn't said a word throughout the duration. It was bad enough knowing he disapproved of the idea. What would he do when the deadline came? Would he stay and fight with them? Leave behind the cause? *If I can't have the man I love with me in the biggest, bravest, most probably stupid thing I've ever done, what am I going to do?*

Chan had been right about one part: anger always made him reckless. But didn't he know Minho was fighting for him too?

Sitting alone on an ivory bedspread they had been meant to share, he wasn't sure.

Three knocks- not on the door, but the other side of the wall facing the night sky. Minho bolt up on his feet. If Kai was going to send a polite hitman, he had to be ready to make the first move.

But then two more echoed; too soft to break the glass pane of the window, too hesitant to kill. There was only one person who would have knocked twice instead of barging in, one person who would always wait for him on the other side.

Minho crept up to the window, drew the panes inwardly open.

"You are an incurable romantic."

"I didn't like the way we ended things," Chan replied simply, perched on the windowsill like a bird. "Come with me?"

Helplessly, Minho smiled; he'd long since given up resistance. "And go where?"

Chan grinned, a creature of the night etched in umbrage and ivory mischief, nodding to the Douglas fir he'd scaled to find his way up. "Somewhere we won't be bothered."

If Minho wasn't already leaning out the window, he would have jumped out of it to meet Chan on the ground. "Sounds like a plan."

Insisting they shadow travel down because Minho had picked thirteen pine needles out of Chan's shirt just from him turning around, they made their escape under the cover of the trees off to the outskirts of the backyard plains which, beyond all of its evergreen darkness, held hidden wonders of its own.

Chan pushed a blue spruce branch out of their way to enter a grove of white lilies* bursting through blades of green, chittering will-o-wisps fluttering about the night lighting it up just for them. He watched as Minho wandered ahead, marveling at the sight.

"I found it walking around a few days ago," Chan revealed. "Figured it would be a good, quiet spot."

Minho chuckled faintly. "For what, is the question."

The vampire wove a path through the flowers, picked up his hand by his waist.

"You have to know I trust you," Chan said, voice low enough to skim the petals. "And why I worry."

"I know." The djinn curled his fingers around his palm. "But I can't exactly say that I do too."

"And you're sure you're ready for this?"

"After years of running from it, I have to be. I'm tired of of it."

Softly, Chan pulled them in- joined hands raised, arm around his waist, Minho's around his neck, a suitable position for a waltz. "Talk to me."

In a flowery bubble just for them, guarded by trees and fairy lights and the veil of the after hours, it was the least they could do.

"Like, don't get me wrong," said Minho. "I want to do this."

"I believe you," Chan promised.

"I've been dreaming of doing this for literal decades." Shift back.

Shift forward. "You do talk in your sleep sometimes."

Step back. "There's nothing I've wanted more than to put that motherfucker's jaw sideways."

Step after. "And so you shall, my dear."

"But." Minho bit his lip, turning the thought over in his mind like a penny. "I don't know if I'll be able to do it when the time actually comes. I mean, I literally made myself *invisible* last time I saw him."

"You didn't *know* you were going to see him," Chan reminded him. "If you do again, you'll be ready."

"It's not like I can *not* be. If he attacks again, shows his fucking rat face, I can't just freak out- not after what he did to Mina, to *Felix*." With each unsteady step one took, the other returned it in kind, reformed it into a dance. "And it's not just them. It's Momo, it's Huening Kai, it's everybody he's ever hurt. When I fight him, I'm gonna be doing it for them."

"And I know you will." Minho butted their foreheads, a side effect of having cats as his first family. Chan giggled. "You *will*. Minho, you're one of the strongest people I know. You survived that nightmare ship with everything Asshole threw at you and lived to tell the tale. You've helped me raise a crew of eternal bachelors into the renegade band of misfits they are now. You watched Inside Out without crying, which may also mean you have no soul, but it's still admirable." The djinn seemed happy with the with the second option. "And you've been there for me just as much as I've tried to be for you. Whatever you choose to do, as long as it's your choice and yours alone, I'm gonna back your play."

Chan's eyes locked in with his, setting the message sent through in stone. Minho softened and resolved in his arms, mind made up. "I want to fight," he told him, voice clear, ironclad. "But I can't afford to fail."

"Love, what do we always tell each other?" Chan brought their joined hands to their hearts. "You've got an army right behind you. And you've got me at your side, always. I might not be able to promise much, but that I'll swear, until the day eternity decides to end."

Minho squeezed his hand, painting a star inside of his palm. "It's gonna be quite a fucking day, huh?"

"That it will," Chan agreed. "But whatever happens, we're gonna be okay."

And then, into the roots of the grass, from the core of his solar plexus, he sang:

*"There's a place for us,"**

Minho closed his eyes, slow smile spreading. *"Somewhere, a place for us,"*

"Peace and quiet and open air," was a dulcet harmony into, *"Wait for us, somewhere."*

Over the course of their story, they had claimed a number of songs as theirs; there was too much good music in the world just to have one. 1961- to celebrate their shared birth month, they'd gone to the theater for the premiere of the original West Side Story (the interracial love story wasn't actually interracial, given Natalie Wood was actually Russian and Rita Moreno was the only actual Puerto Rican in the cast, but people took what they could get). It was almost funny, the pair they made- Chan, who swooned at every minorly romantic moment and Minho, who straight up rolled his eyes at the balcony scene -but when *Somewhere* came on, all they had to do was look at each other through, *"We'll find a new way of living,"* thread fingers in, *"We'll find a way of forgiving,"* kiss under the light of the projector during, *"Somewhere."*

They ended up seeing it two more times, memorizing entire scenes just to get to Maria and Tony in the bedroom, singing about hope and unavoidable heartbreak and what both wished could be. When they got the soundtrack on a record, it played over and over with their own meaning transferred into the lyrics, making it into a ballad about the home they had found, the demons they fielded and fought together, the promise that one day, they would be rid of them, and the two of them could dance in peace.

"Somehow,"

"Someday,"

"Somewhere..."

Past

In every home, there was a hideaway. A nook at the end of the hall, a spare room shrunk to fit a secret, a niche in where only one could fit. Even with his golden prison, Levanter had given Minho that.

Chan knew he hadn't teleported into his lamp- he'd seen the smoke drift out the door. He followed it out into the empty living room, down the catwalk, past the room where Minho had convinced him to let him keep all their witchy findings, funneling up to the roof shingles, where the smoke poured up over the top.

Maybe following Minho was the worst thing he could have done. But then again, maybe it was the only thing.

Chan stepped into the shadow of the rooftop, fixed a point on the view of the receding skyline piqued by treetops, and stepped through.

When he arrived, Minho was already there, like he'd been moments before in his room, sitting with his legs crossed and back to Chan. He didn't have to look up to know he was there.

"With every person who finds my lamp," Minho said, voice carrying over the clouds, "everyone wants something. Blows it like a cheap hundred-dollar check. It gets predictable after a while- fame, money, a lifetime supply of whatever junk food they loved most as a kid. Fleeting happiness, but they wish it every time, like clockwork, like tradition. Live a couple years, and you think you know what they want."

He looked up at him, and Chan found tears budding in his eyes. "No one's ever wanted *me* before."

Chan folded into the spot next to him. "And you're so surprised that I do?"

Minho chuckled sparsely. "Well, no," he replied, sniffing through it. "I mean, I have been with people before- the stars didn't make me this easy on the eyes for no reason." Chan nodded in agreement. "But- it's always been about what I can give to someone else. How *much* I can give." Minho glared at him, half accusatory, half something so compassionate Chan couldn't fully understand it. "You've never asked me for anything."

"I asked for Berry!"

"Two *years* ago. And then that kiss-"

"I'm really sorry -"

"Did you really think I wouldn't do it on my own?"

Chan opened his idiot mouth. "Well." Minho raised his eyebrows, expectant. "It was a fear of mine?"

"See. What'd I tell you? Dense."

"I- wha- *you*-" That goddamned smirk was going to kill him. "You haven't been the most revealing either! How was I to know you haven't been hating me all this time?"

"Do you really think I stayed here just because you flashed your dimples at me a couple of times and gave me a *room*?" Minho scoffed, offended. "I think you know I'm not that easily swayed."

"So you've been staying... for me?"

"You're not the only one who's been selfish. I might not have wanted it at first, but once you find someone who restores your faith in the world and offers to find your freedom in the same stint, you don't exactly let that go."

Chan saw the moon rise in his irises, a palette of blended indigo and rouge laying a bed for the stars. "Really?"

In the dimming sky, Minho breathed out stardust. "Even in places where I was supposed to feel like I had everything, I..." He paused to sound his words out right. Chan got it. "I didn't. At least the things that mattered. The things you grab onto without a thought in a disaster. The things that you think of or look at and think, *that's why*. *That's* what makes it worth it. I sort of accepted it, for a while, that I was just... drifting through. I thought that if I let go of enough, it wouldn't matter to me anymore. That if I just convinced myself I was okay with not living, not loving, I'd be able to believe it." With the first star that twinkled, he said, "What I mean is you gave me a lot more than you know. Whether or not you knew it."

Chan scooted closer- this time, he knew Minho wouldn't run away. "You wouldn't have left me when I offered it, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't have *left you*, Chan," Minho mocked to his sheepish laughter. "Do you wanna know why?"

Chan peeked up to look him in the eye; it was all the permission Minho needed. "Because, in case you haven't noticed, I'm a little more than sick and tired of following someone else's orders, regardless of who." He laced their fingertips, drew them in with his. "I wouldn't have left you if you wanted me to. If you wished, if you asked, if you *begged* me." Minho's palm skated over his hand up his forearm. "I've told you before, haven't I? I'm not going anywhere- maybe I should say it more often." He pushed up the sleeve of Chan's flannel, smiling as his fingers walked up his bicep. "So, you see, it's not just because I don't want to, or because I simply want to spite you that much." Minho curled his hand around over the bite mark on Chan's neck. "It's because lamp or not, deep down, you *know*, Bang Chan." He leaned in, nose to nose, tendrils of hair brushing, eyelashes touching like butterflies blown close by a breeze as he whispered, "You are never, ever, getting rid of me."

Chan inclined his head to mimic the contact. "There." He smirked down at the hitch in Minho's pulse. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"*Fuck* you." Minho shoved his face away, both of them cackling, barely holding the weight of what they'd just accepted. "That's the most emotionally intimate I've been with anyone who isn't my cats in eight years."

"And I appreciate you breaking the record for me."

"We've both given a lot to each other, didn't we?"

"We have," Chan confirmed, flicking a stray hair out of Minho's forehead. "Besides, it's not every day you meet a miracle right where you are."

"How do you just say these things?"

"It's easy when you mean them."

Minho shook his head. It would take him another seventy-five years to fully understand what he meant. "What I wouldn't give to see myself through your eyes."

Chan smiled crookedly, helplessly, unable and unwilling to stop. "All you need is a mirror," he replied. "I'm just looking at you."

Minho puffed out another incredulous laugh; Chan's smile didn't waver an inch. "Fucking hell." He hauled him in by the nape and kissed it off of him.

The kiss started out hard, a scrape of teeth, a stumble, but they found their rhythm, closed their eyes to the gentle push and pull of the symphony between them, the galaxy born between their lips, lazy and leisurely, guiding their hands back to their designated places in hair, around waist, the sweet taste of nectar everywhere on their laughing grins.

When the rest of the stars joined Polaris and the moon in the sky, they were lying side by side, curled towards each other.

"It works this way- our arrangement," said Minho, watching his thumb skate over Chan's cheek. "No one's ever been this good to me."

Chan allowed his own hand to slide over the burn mark on the side of Minho's neck, knowing it wouldn't be removed. "And no one's ever stayed like you."

"You want to go downstairs?" the djinn whispered. "Talk about it more inside?"

"Don't see why we'd need to." The vampire's mouth listed into a soft smile. "We've got all the time in the world."

pov - Ariana Grande

*Somewhere - Rita Moreno

*Red columbine: Strong emotion, anxiety.

*White lilies: Purity, faith, beauty.

Burn The House Down

Chapter 15: Burn The House Down

Grab your bats, snacks, and rollerblades, baby it's Fucking Game Day- Twice and Stray Kids are joining forces to crash Kai's party and kick his teeth in, and you can bet you won't want to miss it.

Way up, way up we go,
Been up and down that road,
Way up and down that road,
We gon' burn the whole house down...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"Whose turn is it to do the pep talk?" whispered Dahyun.

Tzuyu sighed. "Jeongyeon."

Jeongyeon, with a completely straight game face, looked the coven of Stray Kids in the eyes and said, "Fuck shit up out there and don't die."

Jeongin sniffled as a proud tear slipped down his face. "Beautiful."

"Let's give it our all, everyone," Jihyo took over. "Make sure he never gets back up from this."

"Ser*, yes, ser!"

Three days of training, digging, and nefarious plotting had come and went, and the day of execution had come. The covens were chattering excitedly for the chaos they were about to cause, like kids getting ready for a field trip.

"For once," Chan mused, watching his own boys against the banister. "I'm kinda hoping they leave no one standing."

"If that truly is your coven's specialty, then I'm sure you won't need much," Jihyo ribbed him.

"Sorta happens whether or not you want it to. I couldn't ask for a better co-captain."

"It's my pleasure." Even without armor, she looked every inch the general she was made to be. Up over his shoulder, Jihyo smirked. "Looks like the last member of the party decided to show up after all."

Chan turned, and Minho was swanning down the staircase, steps light and balletic, hand trailing the banister. A prince of the cosmos coming to greet his subjects, and Chan was watching him shine. "You ready, love?"

Minho accepted the hand he extended, his smile a photograph soaked in glittering sepia. "Like you even had to ask."

The covens separated into two vehicles- the black SUV and a white BMW, connected by the phone call they used to communicate, linked GPS, and synced-up battle playlist that JiLix and DubChaeng had insisted was necessary.

"The hype is vital for success," Jisung quoted, grooving along to, "*Backstreet's back, alright!*"*

Pulling into the canyon, it was pretty easy to find out where ScreaM was being held.

"Fuck me with a Ferris wheel," Hyunjin cursed.

A classic red-and-white big top stretched out over what could have been an acre of land, ringed by cars and motorcycles and even a few vintage chariots. Even from the outside, the place rioted with noise, with laughter and music and beastly roars, like the lions, tigers, and bears had come out of their caves.

"How much are we willing to bet it's even bigger on the inside?" asked Chaeyoung.

"Not a thing, when we know it's true," said Jeongyeon. Her brow had already pinched in displeasure. "This place is so enchanted I can smell it."

"Me too," Jeongin chimed.

The knowledge sank like cool fog through their skin into their bones: he was really going to be in there. They were actually going to do this. It was really happening.

"So," Nayeon piped up. "We're all going through with this?"

Their eyes drifted to Momo and Minho, who stared ahead with their chins held high.

"I'll give you fifteen bucks if you get his ring before I do," said Momo.

"Done," Minho responded.

Nayeon fell back. "Just double checking."

The interior crashed over them with the sound of brassy music; what had been an already large tent had inflated into a whole landscape of a gothic carnival fever dream: clusters of people in every dress imaginable- from modern Victorian to steampunk to the latest streetwear. Floating bulbs of light made up the clouds in a gaudy candy cane striped sky that stretched out as far as the eye could see. A second floor ring overlooked the bars, boxing rings, tented

niches and carnival games recreated in dark vaudeville twists spread out all around the distorted circus, the sharp scent of cloying perfume and the burnt sugar smell of far too much magic to ignore lifting the veil from their eyes.

"Jesus," Changbin murmured, almost awed. "It's like the Moulin Rouge threw up all over this place."

"Is that the soundtrack too?" Felix listened carefully, nodded with hateful approval. "Damn. The Broadway one, too."

"Creole Lady Marmalade," Momo intoned in time with the saxophone with the same spirit.

"And Kai fancies himself Harold Ziegler," said Jihyo. "So we'd best put him in his place."

"Duke de Monroth for sure," Jisung whispered to Momo, who confirmed it with a finger gun as they formed their group huddle.

"Okay, so we all remember the objective, right?" Chan asked. "We're here to fuck this guy's entire life and career irreversibly- for once, anything goes."

"Necessary violence?" Changbin asked hopefully.

"Necessary violence."

"Yes," ChangIn cheered under their breath.

"We stay as under the radar as possible," Minho reminded. "If Kai finds out any of our identities, it's over."

"We remember our teams?" Chan quizzed.

"Here comes trouble," said Changbin and Sana.

"Make it double," added Jisung and Momo.

"Jessie and James, the real protagonists of Pokémon," concluded Hyunjin and Jeongyeon.

Dahyun reached over and ruffled Seungmin's hair, snickering as he grumbled out of her way. Jihyo and Tzuyu hurled warning glares at Minho, just so he would know they weren't letting him out of their sight.

"Field trip fun time!" Jeongin cheered. Mina rolled her eyes with a smile.

"You think those Whack-A-Moles have actual moles in them?" Felix asked his partner.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did," answered Chaeyoung. "Liberate the furry burrito ants."

"Break." Chan slapped palms with Nayeon as she switched off to his side. "Good luck, everyone. Let's make this count."

"And make it good," Mina winked.

A final unsaid farewell - plus Nayeon blowing a kiss to Jeongyeon, who responded by a grumbly flustered eye roll - and they split off in their teams, each with their own missions in sight.

Changbin and Sana took their trip off to the tents on the left, where rows of slot machines were manned by eager patrons, punctuated by automatic jingles of victory and groans of loss. Behind the drawn entrances were hasty games of blackjack and poker, heads bent over decks both good and lousy.

"So, we haven't exactly gone over how we're going to do this, which I'm going to assume is okay," Changbin started.

"Well, I was assuming we were just gonna walk in, get down to business, defeat the Huns in one fell swoop," Sana replied, edging

past a whooping victor with three straight cartoon cherries in his slots. "But if you've got an idea, that's cool too."

"My approach's always been more of the punch-first-ask-questions-if-they-can-still-talk kind of vibe. I was wondering if that'd be the right one for this."

Sana eyed one of the boxing rings- a mapinguari was getting ready to pile drive some unlucky opponent. "Actually, I think that'd be perfect."

"Really? No qualms at all?" Headshake. "Huh. Nice."

"I'm more of the plant-poison-ivy-in-their-backyard-and-then-call. Y'know, if we ever need subtle."

"Who fucked up so bad you had to give *that* as payback?"

"Leon, Nashua, 1932. As said by the merry murderesses of the Cook County Jail: he had it coming."

"When we get out of here, you are telling me *all* about that."

Despite his boasts of being a 'self-made man,' as taught to them by Momo, Kai's empire wasn't standing on his shoulders alone. While he was out on sea, he had two of his most trusted cohorts handling the affairs of the land while he was away- people who found his monsters and got his money, whether in patrons or other shady deals.

"If we want to take down Kai, we have to cripple his resources," Minho directed. "Without them, he's nothing."

Changbin and Sana were assigned the target of Suho- Kai's resident broker and dealer responsible for bringing in money. If their bets were right, the gambling dens was where he'd be.

"Over here," Sana hissed.

Down the spinning roulette wheels, a gauzy purple tent stuck out among the thin veils of colored fabrics pitched up around it. In spite of the chatter around it, the deep voices resonating from within were heard easily, conspiring about clubs and spades. The entrance was marked by an enormous painted caricature of a winged man with a snake's tail, screaming bloodlust.

The sons of Typhon, Changbin remembered. New additions, not Kai's but Suho's. A strictly reptilian pack who acted as his main source of traveling defense, fiercely loyal bodyguards. If they were inside protecting their ace, they weren't bound to give him up easily.

"Fucking Southside Serpents, am I right?" he whispered to Sana.

"Just what I was thinking." She changed their course up ahead.

"Let's see if they've got the poison to back it up."

Striding over to the tent should not have been as easy as it was. Nobody even tried to stop them- perhaps meaning they were too scared and the thing they were about to attempt was even more stupid than they feared it would be.

But damn if they *weren't* going to walk out of this place with at least one earned bruise.

Sana threw open the flap of the tent. Immediately, the chatter from a circle of leather jackets and one Matrix-style duster at the head of the table silenced. *A warm welcome.*

"Didn't you see the symbol?" one of them asked, in a tone that was more like 'you saw it and ignored it anyway and I don't like that.'

"Members only."

"We know," Sana told him smoothly. "We scheduled a meeting with your leader."

Suho stared up at them, more affronted than confused. "I did nothing of the sort."

"So get before we decide to lay you out," growled a reedy-looking wyvern.

Changbin shrugged. "We could," he admitted. "Or you could give us the room."

Sana moved first- hands snapped out at her sides, raising the belladonna roots from the earth behind their seats, and shooting through the base of their necks, eliciting gasps from their mouths. Changbin followed after in a crouch, slamming his palms into the earth and sending shockwaves of darkness up the roots; an onyx flash blazed in the eyes of the former guards, glazing them over.

Too late, Suho tried to rise from his throne, arms midway transformed into scaled green claws. "You will *leave* at -"

Sana's vines burst from the ground and coiled around his wrists like a barrage of harpoons, binding him to his throne. Changbin vaulted himself up on the green felt table, yanked Suho forward by the collar of his jacket until his shock-frozen face came bare inches from his open palm, which still rippled with deadly ink black.

"Wanna see how that ends?" Changbin challenged.

Suho didn't answer, but the gulp bobbing down his throat spoke for him. He let his breath go when Changbin released him. "You- my- my guards-"

"They're paralyzed- surprise effect of belladonna," Sana clarified. "Combined with demon magic, it's going to last for about fifteen minutes. So you'd better make that worth our time."

"Wh-What could you possibly want? I know neither of you!"

"And you don't have to," said Changbin. "But we know you, and that should mean something."

"You're an important man here, aren't you?" asked Sana. "One of Kai's most trusted."

Suho sucked in a breath. "You know about him?"

Changbin settled back. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Well, not these days. Someone with an inside link's invited, they tell someone else, who tells someone else, who-" He shook his head. "So you know of me. So what?"

"We know what you do for him," said Sana. "You're the moneymaker, the one who gets him all the support he needs."

"Shit job, but it pays well, doesn't it?" asked Changbin cheerfully.

Suho, face waxen under the hanging lantern, threw his head up to yell. "*Typh-*"

It ended with a choked gasp as Sana's vines tightened around his limbs. "Do that and you get one of those berries down your throat."

Still, he struggled against them anyways, rocking side-to-side in his chair. "How do I know if you'll actually carry out that threat?" he asked- a glimpse of backbone that had gotten him as far as he'd come. "If you want something from me, you won't take that chance."

"Okay, that makes me *want* to punch you now," Changbin told him.

"Then I'm right," said Suho, that smarmy fuck. "If I have what you want, what do you have that could possibly make me comply?"

Sana beamed. "I'm so glad you asked."

Reaching into her aviator jacket, she slapped her phone on the table, already recording. "We already told you we know what you do for Kai, Suho. What we left out was that we know *how* you do it."

"And despite the picture you paint," said Changbin, "it's nowhere near as pretty as it sounds."

"You don't know what you're *talk-*"

"You tell Kai's patrons that they're supporting a rehabilitation center for monsters who are using their abilities for evil," Changbin continued, sitting back casually, "rather than the slave work you know well that they do. You tell them the money goes to resources that contribute to their 'betterment' rather than the devices used against them, all the furnishings for that boat, the leftover cash used to hush the supporters who want out." He tipped his head sympathetically. "Already, it doesn't look good."

With every word he was hearing, Suho was growing paler. "How do you know these things?"

"Enough to know that's only half of it," Sana jumped in. "See, with every deal you're supposed to make, Kai hands you some startup money to use for your case, a beginning price. But that's not what you do, is it? You keep one half for whatever investment or gamble you choose, and give the other half to your beloved gang to play with. They're not the cleanest, but does that compare with the profit they bring in?"

"*Lies,*" Suho hissed.

"Only to those who don't keep an eye on them," replied Changbin. "Which, for the record, wasn't hard. Really- it wasn't just the reports filed against them that were paid off and dismissed. They don't seem to care about hiding it, all the bartering, robbing, pillaging they do in your honor- with and for the money you're depended on to have."

"Of course, nobody actually *knows* how you get it," Sana acknowledged. "Kai wouldn't care if he did, and the public wouldn't be as eager to invest if *they* did. But we do." A flex of her fingers and the vines tightened, grinding Suho's teeth. "And I think you know what it could do against you."

Suho seemed to be really taking them in for the first time- two upstarts who burst in with bravado and ended the discussion with a knife to his throat, waiting to be pushed in, the tape recorder a reporting microphone. "If I tell you what you want, what will you do for me?"

"We'll let you go- that'll be enough," Changbin conceded. "We can both walk out of here clean- no one knowing what I and my associate did in here, no one knowing what a scumbag you are."

"It doesn't need to be much- just fill in the blanks, maybe emphasize on what we already said, whatever you think is important. And, if you would." Sana tapped the tape recorder. "Don't leave any of the good bits out. Make it concise."

"But don't worry- we know you're a man of dignity." Changbin picked up a hand at random. "We challenge you to a game."

Suho's mouth dropped open, shut closed, opened again, like a talking trout. "A... *game*?"

"Sure. A redo of the one you'd been playing- a better one with higher stakes."

"If we win, you tell us what you know about Kai's business," Sana proposed. "If we lose, you get to ban us from the premises, all our secrets safe."

Suho sighed heavily; with the vines constraining his movements and one expensive hell of a haircut resting on his shoulders, it must've been hard to do. "Fine."

Sana's vines slipped off his arms, but kept the rest of his body in a tight hold. Suho watched with thin pursed lips as they pushed two of his beloved Sons of Typhon on out of their seats and replaced them, grabbing two new decks at random.

"Alright." Changbin slipped an ace into his hand. "Let's play."

With every step, Hyunjin could feel the stares on his back.

They weren't glares or dirty looks, nothing of the sort- quite the opposite. They were glances that trailed up and down, appreciative smirks he saw on every person he passed.

Thankfully, they were only kept at that- having a guard dog like Jeongyeon patrolling his side was helpful in such a matter.

"Okay, you don't have to *literally* growl at everyone who looks at me," Hyunjin told her. "You're not even in fox form."

"Doesn't mean it doesn't come naturally." Jeongyeon glowered down at the next admirer, nearly making the guy piss himself. "Fucking creeps."

"Jeongyeon, come on. We're on a job."

"People could at least have some discretion."

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't!"

"It happens all the time."

Jeongyeon grumbled. With such a cheerful sibling like Jeongin, it was hard to see any resemblance. "You shouldn't have to deal with that so much."

Hyunjin shrugged, kept his head held high. "When you get used to it, you just learn to roll with it."

Maybe a little depressing, but when you'd heard yourself described as so many Renaissance artist styles you'd memorized the works themselves, compared to every long haired anime boy a being could think of, and described in sad poetry like a vase of flowers, he'd found there wasn't much else he could do.

He was already a siren- that kind of born reputation had people believing instantly that you were just a gaping hole spewing smut playlist classics and a want for all things X-rated and nothing else. Which- no. Just no. Hyunjin had limits, boundaries, hell, even a smidge of self respect. He just couldn't squander all of it crushing every soul who looked at him funny with a Nirvana lyric.

Of course, Hyunjin knew why- he had looked at himself in the mirror to know he was an exceptionally fine individual. But he thought of his painter as someone more like Picasso- abstract, figure put together at odd angles, puzzle pieces that just barely fit in the shape of a face, garish colors that somehow meshed, vibrant cubism. But maybe that was just how everyone saw themselves- a portrait they'd created still in the works, not really there yet and not fully ready to be loved by the public eye, though some went ahead and loved it anyway for reasons unknown.

We can see all the pieces that make us- and we can see just how easily they fall apart.

Hyunjin blinked frowning back to the present. A very depressing reawakening. Was there a such thing as thinking too much? Probably. *But maybe they wouldn't love me so much if they knew who I really am.* The thought made him smile.

"What'd you just think of?" asked Jeongyeon. "Your face has a weird look."

"Sometimes, Jeongyeon, I swear you know *exactly* what to say."

The right hand lane of tents was an... interesting place to be. Each one was made out of the same filmy, dream-colored fabric, where you could just barely make out the shapes of monsters and humans alike mingling inside; sharing drinks, coy laughter, breathing space, and even some, judging from the sound of it-

"I have never wanted my ears cut off my head so badly," Jeongyeon said, gray in the face.

"Bet you're regretting that canine hearing now," Hyunjin teased. But even he, who'd heard his fair share of filth, thought it was a little much. There wasn't even a sign anywhere. "I'm willing to bet Kai went through a Game of Thrones phase. Probably show first, to maintain the generic bitchness, then book out of curiosity."

"George R. R. Martin, you son of a shit."

A piercing yell out of an indigo tent up the path. "Let go of me!"

Hyunjin pulled up short. "That doesn't sound good."

Jeongyeon cracked her knuckles; a flash of lightning sparked between them. "Let's check it out."

Charging up through the insistent flow of people, they found the source: a pretty brown haired girl in a modernized silk hanbok grabbed at the wrist by a behemoth in a swamp green houndstooth suit.

"Do it again!" he demanded. "Your damn cards were lying!"

"It's your future!" The girl pushed away, trying to wrest out of his grip. "You change it!"

"Get the fuck away from her."

Hyunjin hadn't even come four feet of the situation when Jeongyeon grabbed the man's tie, yanked him down and sent her electrified fist rocketing into his gut. Combined with the force, the man dropped the girl's hand and crumpled backwards, efficiently stunned.

The girl stared, eyes switching from the man to Jeongyeon, who looked exactly like the tall ripped red denim jacket-wearing lesbian who punched disrespectful douchebags for a living. "Wow."

Hyunjin could hardly blame her. "It's a thing she does," he explained. "Are you okay?"

"It's okay. He had like, three Greyhounds before he got here. It's something you get used to."

Jeongyeon shot a look at Hyunjin over her shoulder. "You two would have a lot in common."

"Shut up." Back to the girl. "What were you saying about futures? Are you a clairvoyant?"

She scoffed. "Hardly. I'm a dokkaebi- all I do is read tarot. But accurately enough to know that whatever he had coming, he deserved." She nudged their friend on the ground with the toe of her shoe. "You guys are new here, aren't you? Not a lot of others really step in when stuff like that happens."

Which is exactly why we're here. "Yeah, newcomers," Hyunjin replied. "Heard from a friend who heard from a friend."

"Warlock incel," Jeongyeon supplied.

"I know the type," the dokkaebi girl snickered, like she was enjoying the turn her day had taken. "Thanks for that extra hand- both of you."

Before they could reply with the usual 'don't mention it, it's what we do,' she lowered her voice, moved in. "I saw you guys come in. With Momo." Jeongyeon and Hyunjin froze up. "I know her from when I was captured. She was... a friend of mine."

Relief dropped some of the tension from Hyunjin's shoulders. "She was?"

"Yeah. Helped me out a lot. He always said he'd killed them, but I just *knew* she wasn't gone."

"She's in my coven," Jeongyeon answered. "She'd be glad to help you too."

"For friends of Momo's, anything," the girl swore. "And beings who shock grabby drunks in my honor."

"Sounds like a promise." Hyunjin looked around before leaning in.
"Would 'anything' include the whereabouts of any insider footage?"

"Just go behind the tents- you'll see this shadowy crack thing- it's a gateway dimension. If anyone asks, you didn't hear it from me."

"The rebellion thanks you," Hyunjin told her earnestly.

"Don't worry- I've been wanting out of this since I got here. If Momo's back with a gang, it must mean she has a plan." In her smile, Hyunjin could see the cunning dokkaebi beneath a fooling skin. "If anyone else in your group needs help, tell them to go to Somi's tent."

"I told you we weren't calling ourselves that," Jeongyeon whispered as they ducked behind the tents.

"She seemed to like it."

If only Somi had told them exactly *where* to go- the backstage scene of the tents seemed neverending, not to mention they got an even closer listen to what was going on behind cloth walls.

"You mind hurrying up?" Jeongyeon hissed. She'd started running with her fingers in her ears. "I'm starting to *want* my ears to bleed."

"It's just nature in the wild, Jeongyeon." Hyunjin peeked through every somewhat dark nook and cranny. "Maybe use some as ideas for you and Nayeon."

"I am going to snap your reedy little spine over my knee and-"

"Kill me later." Hyunjin pulled them to a stop at a particularly wide swath of gaping shadow guarded with a *Beware* sign.

Deep breath and deep breath out, he started to reach in his hand.
"Please be a dimension, please be a dimension, please be a dimension." His hand went through- not touching fabric, but air.
"Yay!"

"What are you doing?"

"Shit."

A man, slight in stature and silver haired in youth, was speeding towards them, ground slightly rumbling under his feet. "Authorized personnel only!"

"Damn it," Jeongyeon growled, punching her fist into her palm again. Hyunjin saw a flash of the future bound to ensue: Jeongyeon kicking the crap out of yet another douchebag, startling the happy campers in the tents so much they saw the guard on the ground, alerting the authorities, and blowing their cover.

"Wait!" Hyunjin jumped in front of her, revealing himself. "We didn't know. We were just looking around, got carried away." The guard stopped in his tracks. "Really. I am—"

"-absolutely stunning," the man murmured.

"What?"

"What?" Jeongyeon deadpanned.

"Sorry. Forgive me for being so frank, but- really." The man was fully staring now, original mission forgotten. "Really."

Hyunjin didn't know whether to let Jeongyeon at him or laugh out loud. Literally how could he *not* use this to his advantage?

"Well, it's nice to see someone here has eyes," he replied smoothly. "Not many here use them properly."

The guard actually chuckled, the one guys did when they were flattered but wanted to play it off as embarrassed. "Well, I didn't see how I could not point it out. Do you not get it often?"

"Not much, unfortunately."

"Well, you should."

"Okay- *I'm* sorry," Jeongyeon cut in. "What just happened to -"

"*Jeongyeon*," Hyunjin interrupted through gritted teeth. "If you'd be so kind as to *stay out of this*, I'm trying to make a *connection* here."

"Now isn't the time to fucking *flirt*."

"Is that what's going on?" The guard asked. He sounded stupidly hopeful.

Hyunjin replaced his scowl with a practiced smile. "If you'd like."

From the looks of it, he liked that very much. "What's your name?"

"Jin-" Jeongyeon warned.

Hyunjin snapped it up. "Jin. Just Jin. And you?"

"Baekhyun." The answer came immediately. "So. You said you'd never been around here before?"

"Nope- first time. My sister wanted to see if there were any other dimensions to this place- forgive our curiosity." The gumiho's glare burned into his back like a laser.

"You're forgiven. I was just going to, y'know, slap on the wrist, guide you out of here. Obviously, I can't now- if I did, I'd be the one committing a crime."

So far, every word he'd said had made Hyunjin want to hurl; he had him right in his jean pocket. "How about, instead of that," Hyunjin sauntered three steps closer. "I have a professional show me around?"

He might as well have proposed to Baekhyun right there. "I would be honored."

Settling a hand in the crook of his elbow, Hyunjin pivoted him around with himself at his side. "Then lead the way."

Upon Baekhyun telling him and a warily trailing Jeongyeon he was a patupaiarehe (which Hyunjin didn't dare pronounce), they proceeded in a promenade down the aisle as Baekhyun proudly explained that all the money spent by the patrons, whether on gambling, drinks, or the tented company of Kai's own monsters, all went directly into the warlock's coffers, giving him the funds he needed to share his hospice.

"He seeks you out directly," Baekhyun raved. "Stops at nothing to find you and put you in a place where you'll be accepted, *respected*. Me, I was living in the mountains of New Zealand back when he picked me up in '42, and now look at me! First class and living it up."

So he's been properly brainwashed, Hyunjin thought as he pretended not to know what he was talking about. Sad, but at least he knew who would rat them out.

"D'you think we could stop here for a bit?" Hyunjin nodded to an emptied turquoise tent. "All this walking around is getting a little tedious."

Baekhyun split a glance down at the other tents, a pink flush crawling up the collar of his security windbreaker. Behind him, Jeongyeon's face was unfolding in alarm. "In here? Really?"

"Looks to be like the most private place you can get here. 'Sides- I said I wanted to make a connection, didn't I?" Hyunjin ignored the way his own guts roiled in self disgust.

Whatever 'connection' entailed for Baekhyun, the implication was enough to get him grinning like an oaf. "I guess it'd be alright."

Baekhyun dipped happily and obediently into the tent. Before Hyunjin could even address her, Jeongyeon was pulling him over.

"What the hell are you *doing*?"

"The job- getting us information. I got him right where I want him."

"I have electroshock therapy in my hands- I can rip him apart like a rag doll with or without transformation. You don't have to do this."

"*Relax*, okay, I'm not gonna *do* anything. We're just going to talk."

"Does *he* know that?"

"Did you see him? He thinks I've already put out- he's not gonna do anything to mess up his relationship with this." Hyunjin gestured extravagantly to himself. "In the meantime, go. Back to the dimension breach. If I need you, I'll find you, and you can do whatever the hell you want with him."

"You sure?"

It's been way too long since I had an older sibling worrying about me. Hyunjin felt unexpectedly touched at her worry. "I do this all the time- seriously, I once got a guy to give me tickets to a Billie Eilish concert in fifteen minutes. Now go- can't keep him waiting for long."

When Jeongyeon was out of sight, Hyunjin fixed the top part of his hair he'd tied up, hit record on the phone in his back pocket, and went in.

Inside the tent was a stout polished coffee table and Baekhyun perched on a rounded teal settee. "Gotta say- I'm feeling glad that I met you."

"You and me both, handsome." Hyunjin sank into the spot beside him, leaving a few careful inches of space. "Now, where were we?"

"Over there." Momo pointed to the harpy flapping around in one of the fighting rings; she had a ball and chain around her ankle to keep

her from flying away. "Cassia, 1927. She did the best improv."

Jisung watched her dodge another hit from a minotaur. "You guys had time for improv?"

"After hours, stolen in between time. She was second class, but she'd always find a way to get the word around." She pointed over to the satyr with the nearby band playing a mournful rendition of Us and Them.* "Julius, 1932. He liked to play Louis Armstrong before it was cool- even with a reed pipe, he sounded just like him."

"Awesome." But when Jisung looked at him, all he could hear was the lyrics desperately holding on, trying to tell the world, *and after all, we're only ordinary men*. "Why're you pointing them out?"

Momo returned her gaze to the floor. "Because when I knew them, they wanted to be free."

Weaving through the rings was painful for her- seeing so many other monsters she used to know this close in one place was probably the closest she'd gotten to her past in decades. Yet when Jisung suggested a break, a retreat to somewhere farther away from the center of the action, Momo refused. This was the way to gather the most information- this was the way they were taking.

Still, she kept her black hood drawn, an attachment to her maroon leather jacket. Even with her dyed hair she could still get recognized by someone who wouldn't let them off the hook. Hadn't happened yet, but hey- sometimes caution was a good thing to keep around.

"See, that's what I don't get." said Jisung. "Why couldn't they escape like you and Minho did?"

"What we pulled off was something nobody hardly ever managed. In the twelve years aboard Amnesia, countless monsters tried to escape."

"And how many got out?"

"Ten," she said quietly. "Including Minho and I."

"Oh." Jisung dropped it fast; one cue he knew how to take. "That's... kinda fucked."

"It was."

They walked on. Jisung eyed an abandoned beer tankard on the corner of a bar. "How do you know they didn't try before?"

"If they had tried, they wouldn't be here- Kai never lets anyone live once he catches them in the act." She shivered like she'd caught wind of something cold, a ghost's breath on her shoulder. "If they did try to escape, they would have to accept the possibility that they wouldn't make it. Not everyone's able to do that."

"Did you?"

"I reached a point where I didn't care anymore," Momo admitted. "I just knew I wanted out. If they're still here, it can mean one of two things."

"Enlighten me."

"Either they still have hope, or they don't." When Momo looked up again, it was with determination. "For the ones who still do, I free them. For the ones who don't, I give it back to them."

"See? Win-win." Jisung nudged her shoulder. "That's what we need to be focusing on."

"Not how stupid it is that I'm back here when it feels like yesterday that I got free."

"Come on, stupid is great. Stupid is the best kind of thing to do." Jisung picked up someone's half-empty mint julep. "Once you get away with it, there's nothing you can't do."

Momo laughed. Just as he was about to toast and drink to their impending victory, he glanced to the right. Immediately, as the glass slipped out of his hand, Jisung wished he hadn't.

The flap of the turquoise tent had been drawn open, only a little, but enough to see Hyunjin's laughing face tilted back, animated and alive, body leisurely angled to meet that of the man with the fair traits of a patupaiarehe filling the seat beside him. He was talking up something- it was way too loud to tell what, but Hyunjin seemed to think it was the most entertaining thing in the world, dropping the cant of his jaw on his knuckles over the backrest of the settee, looking at him focusing on him with those ocean eyes, an open smirk on his face.

"Hey, you good?" Momo followed his gaze, her own softening with knowing. "Oh. Dude, come on. It's nothing, you know that. He can't mean it."

And, she was right. Deep down he knew she had to be; he'd seen how Hyunjin looked at dozens of other creeps while Jisung clenched a fist in his pocket- bright, lively as he always was, with the faint undertone of *namastay the hell away from me*. But that didn't stop something sour from twisting in his stomach like the drink he hadn't taken, sending sharp jolts through his veins.

Except then Hyunjin felt his eyes, because of course he'd been staring way too long, and glanced at him, right through the rings.

"Sungie." Momo gripped his arm, jerked him to attention. "Let's go."

The patupaiarehe had noticed Hyunjin's pause, started to look in the same direction. Hyunjin, donning a quick smile placed a hand on his chest, keeping him down. It rose up higher until the elbow balanced on his shoulder, arm outstretched, finger pointing at something farther down.

Their eyes scanned the wisps of color until they reached indigo, a bulging blue eye painted over the entrance. Standing outside of it

was a girl in matching silks, waving them in.

"Who is..." Jisung attempted, but Momo was already leading him over.

"Somi," she murmured in amazement. "Our lead." In Jisung's final glance at the siren, he caught the most imperceptible nod.

They barreled into the tent, and Momo and the mystery girl pulled each other into a suffocating hug.

"Oh my *God*," Somi murmured, already sniffing. "Kai told us you were dead."

"That dick." Momo pulled back, wiped her tears. "Did you believe him?"

Somi shook her head. "Not for a heartbeat."

"Um, hi." Jisung waved awkwardly. "Sorry. Hi."

"Oh- no worries. I figured you'd be coming anyway." The girl laughed sheepishly. "Cards never lie."

"Tarot?" Momo and Jisung asked in excited unison. "*Nice*."

"Sit, sit." She guided them down onto thick tangerine colored cushions, pulled a cord that switched on a chandelier of Eid lanterns. Laid out before her table was an array of tarot cards. "Okay, so first-wow. Hi. Great to see you again. And your name?"

"Jisung," Momo answered as the spriggan opened his mouth. "How did you know Hyunjin? Hopefully he wasn't too much trouble."

"Oh, none at all- he came in with that tall blue haired girl and knocked out one of my clients. It was *great*." Jisung might've imagined it, but he could have sworn he saw Somi's cheeks darken under the golden light. "Also, I saw them walk in with you, so. Figured I could help."

"You're still so sweet."

Jisung looked between them, shifted a little more into the light. "So why'd you call us in?"

"Well, obviously, if you guys are coming back with a big rebellion resurgence, you're gonna need someone on the inside to back you up." Somi startled, took in her thoughts. "I mean. That is what you guys are doing, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, thank fuck, I *cannot* last another decade reading fortunes for these fucking people." She rubbed her hands over the table, set them down. "So like, I don't have any blueprints or files or anything, and it'd look way cooler if I did, but I do have the shit in my head so I'm just gonna. Let that rip."

And rip it did.

"So obviously there's some things that are still the same- Kai's not that hard to predict. Still cruising around on Amnesia- he's more careful, though, these days, what with all the coverage everything gets these days. But he still keeps the same traditions, patrons, even Mr. Sharma, though I don't know if you saw that. But, if you guys are digging deep, you should know that he decided to spice it up."

"The party and recruitment wasn't spicy enough?" Momo snarked.

"When has one thing ever been enough for Kai? No- he's added in a new perk- a race. So people can bet on who wins."

Jisung snapped his fingers. "*That's* why there were so many fancy cars out there!"

"Yup. Sometimes Kai makes a couple of his monsters enter- usually against recruitment hopefuls, bored rich people, or biker gangs sponsored by patrons. It's become kind of a main event."

"Gotta hand it to the asshole- he knows what the people want."
Momo pressed on. "What else?"

Somi bit her lip. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask that."

"Do we need to know it?"

"I don't know if you can leave *without* knowing." Somi tucked her chin. "It's... an auction."

From the reluctance in her tone, it wasn't the one that dealt in baubles. "What kind?" asked Momo over an arched brow.

"It started out with him just selling stuff he got bored of- the jade cong, the drakon bone knife, the Hope diamond, that kind of thing. But it wasn't enough- he started putting prices on other things he couldn't use." Somi swallowed. "*Living* things."

Momo's face went sheet-pale. "You don't mean-"

"Second class, third class monsters who don't have a use to him anymore. On occasion a first classer, but not too often." Jisung looked away from her face: for the first time, he noticed the security camera ripped down from the chandelier. "Any patron who bids enough gets everything- existence, contract and all."

There was a moment in time where they couldn't even hear the outside commotion. "Okay," Jisung said at last. "This motherfucker is dying *today*."

"I won't leave this place without being sure of it," vowed Momo.

"If you can manage that much, it'll be a miracle," said Somi. "His stop at the Pacific Coast was sudden- he insisted on hosting ScreaM here. Did he see you?"

"Not me. Minhø."

Her eyes widened. "You- you mean-"

"Yup. Him. Alive."

"But he was lost at sea!"

"Washed up a few decades ago." Jisung offered up another awkward wave. "Guess whose coven he joined."

"*Shit.*" Somi leaned back, utterly shook. "So *that's* why he doubled the guard."

"To capture?" asked Momo.

"No- just to be alert. If Kai's going to see him again-"

"- he's going to want to have the first meet for himself."

"Essentially."

Momo leaned back, winded. "And how much have you risked just telling us this?"

"Not much- just my life, freedom, and second class privileges." Somi shrugged. "If it means helping the cause, I'm all for it."

Over the table, their hands met. Once again, Jisung felt like a nosy little houseplant. "I promise, Somi," said Momo. "You *will* live to feel freedom."

"I know that." Somi's face broke out in genuine grin meant only for the spider woman before her. "Why do you think I'm still here?"

On leaving the tent, Jisung switched off the tape recorder. "Wow. So." He gestured. Momo raised her eyebrows. "Y'all like each other. Like, really, *really*-"

"We were together for a while on Amnesia," Momo revealed, not at all shyly. "We broke up because we didn't see the worth. Figured one of us would be dead soon."

The unsaid hope spoke through the silence: *maybe this time there will be worth*. "Maybe you guys can try again this time."

"Maybe." Momo looked wistful at the idea. "Come on- we have to tell the others what we found. Spread the rebellion."

When they got the alert from Momo, Dahyun stared at her phone for a solid minute. "Are you *fucking* kidding me?"

"And I thought he couldn't get any worse," Seungmin berated his own insolence. "Why would I let myself think that?"

Another text pinged on the groupchat: a set of directions from Jisung with the additional tag *good luck broskis*.

Dahyun sighed. "Guess we have to save some beings without violence."

"Not yet."

At least it meant wandering the premises with a purpose, however shitty of a purpose it was. One could only last so long wandering a back alley big top cesspool without hating themselves for walking among them.

"So there's four of these openings spread out all across this place, and only *one* of them leads to where we need to go," Seungmin summarized dryly. "Sounds easy enough."

"Jeongyeon was able to find one- how hard can it be?" Dahyun scrolled over the directions again. "It's been a long time since I did some good old-fashioned espionage. Did I ever tell you about the time Chaeyoung, Nayeon and I snuck into Atera?"

"You have yet to tell me a great many things, Dahyun."

And thus their unorthodox crusade was carried out with another tale of past madness- the farthest dating from 'the good old days' in the 30's and the most recent being just last month- wanting to celebrate their anniversary properly, she and Sana had stolen a swan boat from the Public Garden. The most exciting thing Seungmin could remember doing last month was taking a walk out into the forest to photograph the beavers building a dam in the lake, but then again that was before he ever thought he'd be infiltrating a warlock's celebration of capitalism.

Whenever anyone got close to noticing them skirting along the walls like a pair of sneaky rodents, Dahyun simply stomped a crack in the ground midstep, sending a shallow rumble through the earth that turned them around and sent them running to something more stable to help them forget about it. Seungmin felt like he should have been jealous, but, after spending so much time around so many powerful and vibrant beings, he found it was easier to appreciate it more.

"And that's how Jeongyeon got away with that Dior junon dress from 1949," Dahyun completed proudly.

"And she's just been keeping it with her all this time?" Seungmin asked incredulously.

"Yep- it's in her closet as we speak. I think she's saving it for a special occasion."

"If we get out of here alive, that'll be special enough." He stuck his hand through another crack- brushed fabric. "*Damn* it! Why are there so many folds in this place?"

"I mean, it's. It's kind of a big cloth tent, and nothing's perfect, so."

"Well, it sounds like Kai has all the enchantments in the world. Couldn't the bastard have just filtered those out too?"

"He expected guests- he didn't expect crashers." Dahyun paused to turn that over in her head. "*Damn*, that sounded *cool*." Seungmin

scurried ahead, shaking out the cloth as he went. "I'm pretty sure people are going to notice if the walls are moving."

"Have you seen that crowd when the bar started singing Sweet Caroline*? No one's looking at the *walls*." He kicked aside an emptied beer bottle. "Besides, this is a project in which I am invested. If I'm get it done, I'd better start it fast."

"Hey, the whole point of me being here was so you didn't have to do that *alone*." Dahyun followed behind. "I'm not gonna be blamed if you end up bringing this whole place down."

"It's not the craziest thing I've ever done." She scoffed. "Did Hyunjin not tell you how he created Thor's Well after getting into a fight with a Yachats river god?"

"Sounds like you've got some cool stories too."

Seungmin might have elaborated more on them had he not heard the voices drifting from behind them: giggling. "Oh, no."

Dahyun looked ready to gag. "Please tell me that isn't-"

"Literally where else would people go to drink and do a stupid thing that they won't remember?" Seungmin rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. "God, I *hate* your creations."

The voices were coming closer, attaching themselves to shadows draped all over each other. Dahyun grabbed his arm pulled them ahead. "Move, move, fucking *move*."

"Move? And go *where*, exactly?"

"Maybe anywhere but here, for starters?"

"How is it possible for drunk people to move so *fast*?"

"I don't know, maybe we're moving slow!"

"That doesn't feel too possible!"

"Oh my God- wait, shut- they're *right* there."

"No, no, no-" An arm grabbed his, pulled him into the wall. "*Hey*, oh, shit-"

And through it, they fell into darkness. Suddenly, looking around, the world was full of it- erased of the saturnalia mirth from the party.

Dahyun turned to him. "Did we just-"

"- find a gateway dimension by fleeing the prospect of intimacy?"

She wheezed laughing. "*Dude*."

"We *did* it!" Cackling, they pulled away out of the shadows and into the dimension, where they saw them.

"Oh, *shit*," they breathed out, this time with horror.

They had found another dimension. And it had been exactly what they were looking for.

In front of rows and rows of polished trinkets were cells crowded the dark; it was impossible to tell what monsters were occupied inside, but each of them were cowering in the smallest corner they could find for all they were worth, some dozing, others too drained to even care about being awake. There was no natural light except for the dim floating bulbs floating in an infinitesimal ceiling, along with the thin vein of burning orange-red around cuffed wrists, like metal fresh from the forge. *Day must blend into night like a passing minute.*

"The prisoners," Seungmin whispered. They were hardly even looking up. "Are they all here?"

"Don't know where else they could be." Dahyun shot off a text to the groupchat without even looking down. "Come on."

They crept into the range of the cages, passing by soul after chained, despondent soul. The oread pulled Seungmin down to one of them, picked up a tag. \$49,000, it read: a starting price. "Jesus."

"I know, right?" A girl's smirking voice within jerked their heads up. Thin golden luster illuminated dark skin, feather white dreadlocks swept over her shoulder- a swan maiden. "Not even in the hundreds."

"What happened?" The bleaty yell of a dahu rang out. "Did they move the auction in here?" Groans of dismay grumbling through the cell block.

"Uh, no," Dahyun tried to shout over them, "No, I assure you, that's not what's happening. This is-" She chewed her lip, at a loss. "We made a very out of context appearance, didn't we?"

"I mean, we didn't exactly *plan* this, in our defense," Seungmin amended. "But we can methodically wing it?"

"Wait- your scent." A crocotta lunged forward, their nostrils flaring. "Lavender and sugar. Do you know of Minho?"

"Purple hair, talks about his cats in every conversation, jackass with a prickly heart of gold?" Murmurs of recognition. "He's kind of my best friend." Hearing the words out loud even took him aback. "*Damn.*"

Slowly, the monsters were coming back to life again, standing up, peering through the bars. "Some security grunts were talking about sightings of a jorogumo and djinn," the swan maiden reported. "Are you guys with them?"

"If the name Momo was mentioned with jorogumo, then yes," replied Dahyun.

"Are they here to avenge us?" The crocotta demanded. "Has Judgement Day finally arrived?"

With so much brewing excitement, Seungmin didn't see why keeping it from them would do any good. "Well, with any luck, that's what we're hoping."

A bubble of hysterical laughter burst throughout the cells. The crocotta howled, an azeban screeched something like, 'Jesus fucking *Christ*,' and a duende bawling in Spanish, something like a thank you to the heavens.

The swan maiden nodded to them. "How about you prove it and get us out of here?"

"You mind if I do the honors on this one?" Seungmin asked Dahyun. "I'm feeling pretty ready for it."

Dahyun moved aside. "By all means."

Rising to his feet, he shut his eyes, centered his mind, took in a breath. When he let it go, an ache flashed through his bones, coursed through the muscles of his arms and changed them, grew them into something stronger, a reflection of what festered inside: chestnut brown fur sprouting over his arms, fingernails sharpening, elongating into claws. A wolf and a human's power, concentrated and combined.

Seungmin grabbed the bars of the cage, closed his fingers around them and, with a creak of metal *pulled*- yanked them apart for enough of an entrance for any fun size being. "That good?"

The swan maiden, who'd backed a reasonable distance away, stepped through the opening he'd made, grinning as she made her way out to cheers. "Better than good." She flashed him a grateful smile. "Thanks, wolf."

"Thank you." The tiniest flush heated his cheeks. "I-I mean, uh. You're welcome."

Dahyun shook her hands out. "My turn." She thrust her hands into the dirt as though it were nothing but quicksand, particles crawling up to her elbows, solidifying into thick guards. On pulling them out, she had donned earthen boxing gloves the size of a small boulder. "Move back, please."

She gave the crocotta just enough time to oblige before she slammed her fist through the bars of the cage, bursting them open. "Who wants to go next?"

Either the party was too loud, or the dimension was just made to swallow up sound, but with every blow Dahyun landed or cell Seungmin wrenched apart went was an uninterrupted orderly queue of broken bonds- the released monsters who could helped them out, went around the room picking locks, smashing ceilings, whatever got their allies free.

A cheerful note of whistling to the tune of Sweet Caroline cut through the clanging- a man in a plum colored suit and slim dark purple turtleneck strolling in from the crack which they'd come. Aka, Lay-finder and handler of Kai's monsters, who was currently stepping to an eye-widening halt on seeing all his bidding items standing around uncontained.

Dahyun glanced from him to the cell she'd just punched open. "I'm guessing we should go-"

A whoosh of white feathers and *bam* Lay was on the ground, the swan maiden and a whole militia of pissed off monsters converging on him.

"Stop this!" he commanded, scrabbling back with a wizarding spellbook flipping open. "As your master I *forbid* you-"

"*Judgement Day!*" The crocotta shouted, and the dahu threw the duende screeching a ululating grito straight at the damn book, and the whole lot of them closed in as he screamed.

In a mess of destroyed cages, Seungmin found it the right time to say, "I think they've got it under control."

As they moved out behind them, the swan maiden poked her head above the beatdown. "Thanks again!"

"Have fun!" Dahyun saluted.

"Don't forget to get the fuck out!" Seungmin added, and slipped out after her.

"I feel like we're DJ's making sick beats but to the sound of torture," Jeongin mused.

Mina didn't even look up from the lacrima. "Please stop."

"Sorry." Pause. Thumb-twiddling. "But isn't that kind of it?"

"*Jeongin.*"

The second floor ring of the pavilion was supported by sturdy pillars of wood, which were thankfully strong enough to keep them from plummeting through the boards. Occupied by snooty, snickering rich people who paid no mind to the gumiho and the sorceress huddled in a corner, it was the perfect place to conduct their work.

Well, Mina was working- magic was her field of expertise. Jeongin was answering calls, keeping the mood light and overlooking the underground scene and judging the shocking lack of drip emanating off people who clearly had so much money but didn't know how to use it to create a synchronized fit.

"Lord, what is she *doing*?" he murmured, watching a woman with a hoop skirt laugh it up with a vetala. "Wearing that with a petticoat- it's not even historically accurate!"

"I think the phone just rang," Mina said, very much more focused on the job than he was.

"Ah. Thanks." He picked up the phone, broke out beaming when he saw the caller. "Seungmin, my lovely, my dearest, how are we?"

"Uh, good? I mean, alive and well, essentially. We, um. We did the thing."

"Really? That fast?" Mina cocked her head. *The Thing*, Jeongin mouthed. Quickly, she dug out more cords. "How'd you and Dahyun manage?"

"It was kind of a team effort, really. We found the monsters in cages, bidding prices on them. We started freeing them, they started getting each other out- oh! Even Lay came in."

"Lay? As in Threat Number Two? Finder and keeper of monsters? What happened to him?"

"Uh, surprisingly, not us. It was the prisoners who got to him. Hear for yourself." The phone audio shifted, a glitch through a new dimension, giving Jeongin an earful of what he assumed war video games sounded like, with scratches and yells and piercing screams. Thankfully, Seungmin didn't make him listen too long. "Yeah. They're having a good time."

"Deserved, honestly." Jeongin cleared his throat. "Meet Mina and I under the second floor?"

"I'll try not to make you wait too long."

"I'll be waiting~"

Seungmin made a vague coughing noise. "Cool. Yeah. See you." The call ended abruptly with a beep.

"You ready?" Mina asked. She had the cord out and available.

Jeongin handed her the phone. "Do your worst."

When she'd first brought up 'sound lacrima,' he'd expected the product to be more like a Bluetooth speaker redesigned to a more witchy vibe. What sat on the table instead was a huge chunk of what looked to be raw garnet with a bunch of copper-iridescent wires (they'd been pulled out of something Mina explained as a bi telephone, which had nothing to do with the sexuality) sticking out attached to different inserts of the phone, buzzing with words.

"Once everything's in place, it's going to crack open with something we can use to show everyone in this tent what Kai really is," said Mina as she rubbed her hands over the stone.

In conclusion, they were going to make an exposure tape the old fashioned way- the magic way. Jeongin still didn't fully comprehend it, but he still supported the idea all the same.

"Hey, Mina?" A small grunt; he'd startled her concentration. "I'm not gonna be annoying again, I swear." Her mouth twitched in a small smile that let him go on. "Once that lacrima's full of everyone's information, what happens next?"

"We send it off to Dahyun and Seungmin, who get it to the sound system." Her fingertips crackled vivid magenta, something adjacent to lightning. "And after that, we get out of here."

"Which we'll do without fail." Jeongin chewed his lip. "But that's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

"I meant after we do this- after we escape and get away. What do you think's gonna happen then?"

Mina's sparking fingertips relaxed, switching her attention off to him. "To be honest, I don't know," she admitted. "A lot of things. Good

things, I'm hoping. I don't think any of us have done anything this big before."

Jeongin willed his foot to stop tapping. "Like monsters getting freed?"

"That's what our whole operation's based around. I'd like to say of course."

"What do you think'll happen to the patrons?"

"They'll do what rich people do: move on to the next crazy, philanthropic thing and occupy their time with it. Give it a few years, and it'll have been like Kai's whole empire never existed."

"That'll be something." If he sat like this for much longer, he was going to explode out of his seat. "And what about Momo and Minho?"

Mina rested her hand on the lacrima, eyes dimming a sheer silver. "They'll still give us hell for being concerned," she said, making them laugh. "But in a way, they'll be liberated too. A weight lifted off their shoulders. The freedom they hadn't gotten to experience."

Jeongin had watched Minho cry, fume, and obsess over Kai, over exacting his revenge, over making him pay for every last crime. *Once this gets done, he'll finally get to think about tomorrow again.* "And that alone'll be worth it."

"It will." Mina craned her neck out to look over the railing. "Who was the woman you were looking at earlier? The one with the petticoat and hoop skirt?"

"Huh?" Memory loss glitch- reactivating. "Oh, right! That one, down there. The one in the light blue dress."

Mina scanned the crowd until her eyes caught the target. "Oh, I see her now." She giggled. "Those really aren't meant to go together."

Jeongin smiled, settled into his chair just a little bit more. “Now you see it.”

Chatter from below. The blackmail crystal buzzed. Two friends smiled over it.

And then Mina’s entire face fell. “Get back.”

He couldn’t even ask why she shoved the lacrima in his hand, slapped two Post-Its over their chests, and pulled them against a wall when philanthropist billionaire warlock Kai himself came rounding the corner.

The first thing he could see about Kai was that, amazingly, he was exactly how Minho described him: infuriatingly, stupidly hot in that cult leader kind of way. It was unfair: why couldn’t the evil people just look as ugly as they were on the inside?

The second was that, despite the imminent threat they posed to his good time, he wasn’t even looking at them.

Jeongin opened his mouth to say as much to Mina only to have her hand clapped over it, the other pointing from Kai to the Post- ohhh, *shit*, that was why. She’d whipped out an invisibility glyph; the same one Minho had used the night they’d arrived in Colorado. The only reason Kai hadn’t spotted them was because neither had dared to breathe.

Trailing behind Kai were two leather-jacketed lackeys: Sons of Typhon. “We swear it, sir,” one of them stammered out. “That was what happened.”

“Truly?” Kai stopped; instantly, Jeongin could see what was so deadly about that turn-around. “So you really mean to tell me that a faerie and a demon overpowered *eight* of my most trusted bodyguards in under the span of a minute?”

Mina rolled her eyes skyward, visibly gritting her teeth to keep from cursing out loud. Even Jeongin couldn't help but think *oop*.

One of the Sons shifted back on his heels, the duty of delivery falling onto him. "Well. Yes, sir."

"You couldn't find them when you regained consciousness?"

"They'd already left the tent."

"And Suho refused to say anything about what had occurred?"

"Not a word."

Kai sighed. "This really must be worth it," he muttered, through the floorboards and into the ground to some underworldly deity Jeongin hoped was turning the other cheek. "What else have you found?"

He continued his Darth Vader trek down the catwalk, his attendants to stumbling after him. Jeongin, who'd just about had it with sitting around and watching, grabbed Mina's hand and moved to follow them. Even though no one would hear or see them over the noise and bustle, it just felt necessary to tiptoe to the inner tune of The Pink Panther theme, like their lives depended on every step.

Kai had stopped inside yet another alcove- cushioned and luxuriated, the perfect place for a man to brood with company.

"... and Baekhyun- you know how he is! Devoted as any being worth their salt," the first Son was rambling. "He would never do anything to sabotage your operation."

"And yet you still saw him in one of the pleasure tents with a red haired *siren*, of all things?"

Mina looked at Jeongin expectantly. He just shrugged; if Hyunjin had gotten some hapless security guard alone, it was for the good of the team.

"Did you hear what they were saying?" Kai continued.

"We- we couldn't get that close," the second Son confessed, already fearing punishment. "But they looked, uh. Comfortable."

Another world-weary sigh. "Of course," Kai grumbled. "What else?"

And so went on the list of Jeongin and Mina's covenmates doing things that made them beam with pride: Jeongyeon apparently punching a Mr. Gideon Mallister in the gut, Jisung stealing a drink order from one very put-out mistress, and even advisor Lay going missing- very coincidentally some twelve minutes after Momo had called about the to-be-auctioned monsters.

"And you're sure that was an *empousa* you saw in the ring?" Kai asked, leaning heavily on the word. "That mapinguari hasn't gone down in a brawl in years."

"Couldn't be anything else, sir."

It was Jeongin's turn to look at Mina, who was already blushing- though that might have been the pent-up air she was holding in.

"Very well. And the jorogumo and djinn- you have sights on them?"

Any pride they had snuffed out like a candle wick.

"They're still on the premises, sir," the second son reported, that dickhead. "The jorogumo has moved into the tent scene, and the djinn has come closer to the bars."

Kai considered that, cool calculations already pouring out of his mind. "I shall make my appearance to him soon," he announced. Then, with grim laughter: "Someone has to tell him about his undead boyfriend in the arena."

Jeongin felt his breath pushing out in a building scream he couldn't let loose, budding tears in the corners of his eyes. It must have been

right there on his face; Mina, her own expression panicked, grabbed his shoulders and forced him to look down at her.

"He is still in place, sir," said the first Son. "What are you going to do with him?"

"That is not for you to know," Kai snapped. "Tell me- are SC in place?" They hadn't gotten anything on an SC.

"Yes, sir."

A menacing chuckle out of a man who never laughed any other way. "Then they will take care of it. The djinn will have no choice but to return to me. Go- you are dismissed."

Pledging their thanks, the leather jackets scurried down the catwalk. The scrape of a chair, a thoughtful silence, and Kai trod down the other direction, already plotting away.

Jeongin and Mina let their breath go; the effect was like being drop kicked from space back to the earth. "Fuck sound rock," Jeongin gasped. "Find the others."

"We will," panted Mina, already gathering their things. "You held out for a while. Didn't know you had it in you."

"Touched the bottoms of a lot of deep lakes in my time. Now come on. If Seungmin's as punctual as ever, he should be here right-" A hiking boot clocked the railing and tumbled over. "Now."

They leaned over the railing to see Dahyun and Seungmin already craning their necks.

"Hey, Juliet!" the werewolf called up. "Need a hand?"

Despite Seungmin being the offerer, it was Dahyun who extended it- a stomp on the right crack, the raise of a hand, and a slanted slab of earth shot up. Mina, who was no doubt used it, slid down slick as butter on a pan. Jeongin, decidedly a little less used to it, ended up

surfing, screeching, and falling onto Seungmin almost halfway down. He considered it a win in the flush on his face as he helped him up off the ground.

“Did you get our message?” asked Dahyun once she’d retracted the slide.

“We did,” said Jeongin. “It’s in the lacrima, fermenting as we- fuck, ask Mina, I don’t know how these things work.”

“We overheard Kai on the second floor- he’s been keeping up with us in here,” Mina supplied for him. “From the sound of it, he’s found Minhoo and is planning something for Chan. He might be using him to get him back.”

“Has anyone heard of an SC?” Jeongin chimed in.

Tragically, both Dahyun and Seungmin shook their heads. “Bad, I’m guessing?”

“If it’s going to be used against Chan, it’s worse than bad.”

“Shit,” Mina hissed. She snatched the lacrima from Jeongin. “Text the group chat- new plan. Dahyun and I are going to find the sound system- you and Seungmin find the arena. Try to be quick.”

Lacrima under her arm like a football, she dragged Dahyun trailing after her. Jeongin snuck a glance at the werewolf; he had bits of dirt still clinging to his hair. “If I’m Juliet, does that mean you’re my Romeo?”

Seungmin chuckled. “It better mean that you won’t leave me in the dust.”

“Minnie dearest, I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The first thing Tzuyu and Jihyo had told Minho was that there was no way in hell was he getting out of their sight.

So naturally, that was the first thing he did.

It wasn't like they'd been letting him do much more, anyways. Just patrolling the area for anything suspicious enough for them to sneak in and see what they could hear- mostly the usual tea on money, politics, and dark magic. As thankful as Minho was for such devoted guards, it had been all too easy to trick them into thinking he'd found a lead by the slots, which were coincidentally among the busiest of crowds there.

If he was really going to get anything done on this mission, he was going to have to take it upon himself.

Minho slunk off to the bars down the left, never so glad to blend in with so much gaudily dressed aristocracy. He dropped onto a stool in front of a sign reading MAISON in looping violet neon. When the deer woman manning the counter in an suit that put every 40's gangster to shame turned to address him, he'd already stole himself a glass.

"My eyes haven't deceived me in years, so I know they don't now." Dami shoved the liquor bottle under the bar. "Minho, as I live and breathe."

"See you've been the same as ever, Dami." Even with all the pressure of the day, it was good to see a familiar face. "Has he been treating you well?"

"Just as well as all the other first classers who stay in line. You were lucky enough to get out of it."

"Only to get pulled in all over again."

"I heard rumors that you'd showed up with Momo, prayed they weren't true. What're you doing back in the game?"

"The game missed me, called me back. I'm doing what I should've done years ago- getting us out of this for good."

"You and the ragtag found family you made along the way?" Minho raised his hands: *caught me*. "Kai hasn't stopped looking for you since the day you disappeared. He knows you're here- he's gonna sniff you out eventually."

He held out his glass. "So won't you do a dead man a favor and pour him a drink while he chisels out his gravestone?"

Dami snickered and took it. "You really do have a death wish."

"Only one I can grant myself." Minho let her get to work on his usual; it hadn't changed since they'd last met in year '35. Not that he was sure he'd even drink it; if he'd gotten away with going around on his own for this long, it meant Kai wasn't too far behind. *And if that dickbag tries to surprise entrance me one more time, I need to be ready to face it.*

Long ago, Minho had wondered if the world could read his mind. It would certainly explain why every worst thing he could think of happened the minute after he thought it.

There really was nothing else that explained the expensive perfume and poorly cloaked burnt sugar wafting into his nostrils and filling them with the scent, the chilled presence of ice behind his back that lingered like a corpse who had walked straight from the morgue.

A curling flash of silver- too bright and clear to be smoke -swiveled the seat beside him. Dami, head bent over the cocktail shaker in her hands, didn't dare flinch.

"I knew I'd find you."

Waves crashed in Minho's ears, sounding like screams and blood flow. His heart was beating too hard for him to speak.

"Course, we both knew, didn't we? Take a year, a decade, a couple dozen. It could have never been avoided." Minho stared unblinkingly ahead as the seat was filled. "Minho."

Minho felt like a pearl being shoved back into the throat of the clam. But still, for what it was worth, he made himself look up, face the warlock full on. "Kai."

He'd never sounded so small all his life.

Kai was dressed for the occasion- meticulously styled hair and a smile cut and cultivated to woo a crowd over his tapered red silk suit and low-buttoned leopard print shirt. Over his heart was the tattooed sigil of Lucifer- his warlock mark. "It's been too long."

Minho's gaze slipped down to the bar to a vein of wood, to the ring left by someone else's glass. "Can't say it has."

He chuckled as if they were old friends, just happening upon each other. "I missed that dry wit." Kai watched his ridiculous black diamond glint under the neon lights. "I missed you."

"You missed my *power*." Minho glared holes into the wall. "You didn't miss me."

"Please, that's everyone's excuse." Kai's fingers waved, sparking a flurry of ash. "You miss the memory, not the person. Why not both?"

"Because only one mattered to you."

"Then what does it mean that I have been searching for you since the night you left?"

"That you're still the same selfish, greedy villain who took me in the first place."

"I understand that you are angry," said Kai measuredly. "But realize that I have known you were here since the minute you arrived. Don't you think I could have done something about that?"

"And what, am I supposed to feel touched? Say thank you?"

"Don't you see, love?" Without Chan's affection curling around the word, it didn't sound nearly as warm. "This- all of this revelry -is for you. To welcome you." Kai leaned closer in Minho's periphery, and the ground tilted askew beneath his feet, storm bellowed in his ears. "You were my sparkling diamond."

"Don't you dare," Minho snarled, snatching himself away. Kai watched him with sinister bemusement. "I wasn't *shit* to you. You only kept me because I could give you whatever you wanted. I'm *never* doing that again."

A clink of glass- Dami had set down his drink. Minho only caught her eye for a second, a tiny nod of encouragement. But if there was anything Kai hated, it was being interrupted. "Dami, dear, could you leave us be?"

"Kai - "

Kai jerked his wrist; a silver flash locked her bones ramrod straight, and Dami spun around, carried on her business with her back turned.

"Leave her out of this."

But the warlock had already moved on from Dami. "Your cuffs are gone," Kai observed, as if that wasn't the first thing he'd noticed when he sat down. "What happened to them?"

Minho could feel the rope of the noose he was slipping over his head. "I outgrew them," he replied blithely. "Got sick of the gold."

"Right." Kai swirled a champagne flute that hadn't been there before, sipped delicately with a smile. "And that would have nothing to do with the vampire you took up with, would it?"

The rope pulled tight. Water lapped his legs; the tide trying to pull him under.

"You led him in with your little coven, hardly even keeping it secret. I can see what you like about him- he's adorable."

Minho felt bile rising up in his throat. "Stay away from him."

"Oh, come on, you were practically flaunting them in front of my face, what else was I to do?" The final puzzle piece clicked into place, and Kai's smile spread like poison. "You tricked him into freeing you, didn't you?" Minho's fingers clenched into a slow, shaky fist. The motherfucker *laughed*. "You sly dog! And you roped the rest of them into it- even got Momo back with her crew. I must say, I'm impressed."

"Stay away from them," Minho repeated, fighting against the crack in his voice. "I'm not going to let you hurt them."

"Then how else will I get to you?" Kai lifted the leverage bar higher; that was his power, not magic. "You're stubborn- if I hurt you, you only get angry. But if I take something of yours, then you have no choice but to run after it, which inevitably leads to you coming back to me."

"I was never yours to begin with."

"And that's where you're wrong, dearest." Minho flinched as the black diamond reached over, flickered, and- wrapped slender fingers around his drink. "With or without that lamp, there is no else you'll belong to. Not your boyfriend, not your coven, not even yourself."

Before Kai could take a drink, Minho lunged. The star he'd been crafting in his palm exploded out like a cannonball into the warlock's sternum and slammed him against a pillar so hard the walls shook. He didn't care. He wanted the whole tent to collapse and take Kai with it.

"You shut the *fuck* up," Minho seethed, pinning him up like a Jedi, only ten times hotter and more pissed. "There's no lamp in the equation anymore- you said it yourself. No way for you to pick up a piece of metal and say you own me, no way for you to chain me to your beck and call to give you whatever you want. Meaning there's nothing keeping me from doing what *I* want." His fingers flexed, and the star melted into ether and spread into Kai's bones, burning their way through, lighting his face ablaze in a frozen scream. "You've only ever seen me tied down. After all these years, do you really want to see what it's like now that I can finally let loose?"

Kai parted his lips around a crow's squawk, fingers twitching and grasping at air, crown of his head pressed to the wood. Minho could see another body in the same position- Huening Kai, but the opposite. Where the peryton's world had been cold all around, Kai's was burning up from the inside out. *Where one was innocent, the other is being brought to justice.* Minho curled his fingers deeper, wanting him to feel all of it.

But even through his purging, his punishment, Kai managed to croak out, "Area."

"What?"

"Arena," said Dami quietly. Her back was turned, but behind her tamed wolf cut her eyes were on Minho. "He's in the arena."

Kai, still strung up, had started to laugh- a madman wrapped in silk. "What did you do?"

"Nothing yet." He gasped, gargled, giggled. "Although, Sehun and Chanyeol have always been a touch impatient. Who knows- they might've done away with your little bloodsucker already."

And just when I thought I was actually going to kill him this time. Minho spared a glance at his drink splattered on the ground with broken glass, then Dami for the final verdict.

"Upper left corner by the entrance, through the rings, before the tents, past the spiked cotton candy machine. There's time if you run."

"*Damn* it!" Clenching his fist, Minho threw Kai to the dirt on top of his ruined cocktail, chugged the rest of his champagne, and chucked that at him too as he stormed out. "You're a saint, Dami."

"Good luck," she called after him.

"Watch out, folks!" The emcee shouted. "She's going for the K-O!"

The crowd roared their enthusiasm. Even from the safety of the sidelines, every inch of the ring smelled like peanuts and lager. Felix counted on his fingers the seconds it took for Chaeyoung to come running at her opponent.

She lead with a flaming cross and hook, dodged back in expert succession as the manticore swung at her. Chaeyoung ducked a heavy punch, sidestepped underneath and jumped to run along the ropes like gravity no longer existed. Before the manticore could even turn around, she ricocheted off the ring post and spun into a whirling corkscrew kick, both hooves knocking the venom out of his mouth. Felix tilted his head just in time to avoid its range.

In comical slow motion, the beast's knees buckled, eyes rolled up, and slammed the floor of the mat with a resounding thud that shook the earth. Everyone in a mile radius screamed their applause.

The emcee clambered over the ring to help Chaeyoung to her feet. "Everyone, give it up for the Hellraiser!"

He raised her fist in triumph. Felix whooped over them- from afar, it might've seemed useless, but Chaeyoung beamed, breathing hard under a light sheen of sweat, radiant as a wildfire.

When the crowd cleared up enough to let the champion out of the ring, Felix welcomed her with the driest bar rag he could steal. "You

did great.”

“The people wanted a Goliath versus a genderbent David, so I gave it to them.” Chaeyoung took the towel and draped it around her neck. “My theory has been proven correct.”

“How so?”

“Their tattoo.” She pointed to the manticore being lead out of the ring. “It does more than brand them- it siphons their power.”

They started walking out of earshot. “How could you tell that?”

“It flickers every so often- when Kai drains more of their power. It’s hard to notice, but that’s when they falter, show a tell.”

“*That’s* why you took him down so fast.”

“And I didn’t feel like holding back on my fourth round.”

Felix hummed thoughtfully. “If their magic’s being drained, where’s it going?”

“Where else would it go?” Chaeyoung made a miscellaneous gesture encapsulating the word Asshole. “Having a sorceress girlfriend has it’s perks- you learn about all kinds of magic, how it can be harnessed and used. Like.” Hand-clap, boi gesture. “Kai’s a warlock, right? He got his power from another demonic source. Because that shit never comes without a price, he’s gotta have something that binds him to his patron and gives him his power.”

Felix mimicked her move. “Which would be?”

“His tattoo- it’s obvious,” she said, like of course it was. “It takes the power that he steals from others and converts it into a source he can live on. ‘Course, he’s a human, which is ew.”

“No-no,” Felix echoed with a thumbs down.

“So he can’t summon it with just will alone. He needs something else to get the extra push.”

“Like what?” Chaeyoung raised her eyebrows: dude. He gasped. “Oh my God. You mean like his - “

“ - prententious prick-ass ring? Yes.”

“That would explain why he never takes it off! Have you told Momo or Minhoo?”

“Momo was the one who gave me the idea- I just wanted to see if it had any fuel.”

Felix whipped out his phone. “I’m gonna text Minhoo everything you just said and hear him keyboard smash.”

“What does that sound like?”

“A multitude of things, really, but mostly Nyan Cat glitching through Suburbia by Will Wood.”

One might have said Felix wasn’t contributing much to this rather unorthodox method of collecting information, but he believed strongly that good moral support played an underrated part in every operation. So far, Chaeyoung had bested every adversary thrown at her, Felix playing her supportive manager, and it seemed to have worked pretty well.

“I love how everyone’s actually been looking for clues and you’re just looking for people for me to beat the shit of,” mused Chaeyoung.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take your place anytime?” Felix asked again.

“No, you *fucking* donkey, you will not do that. Just because we’re on a job doesn’t mean you get to ignore the doctor’s orders.”

“I just want to know if I’m a sufficient helper.”

"You congratulated my first win with a cherub's cup you nipped from a Son of Typhon. You're doing great- unless you want to snap your leg."

"I like my leg unsnapped," Felix decided. "Still, this has been quite educational. Not only are we learning how to dismantle an entire monopoly, but I'm memorizing an entire musical in the process."

Chaeyoung scoffed. "Just because the soundtrack's been playing over and over doesn't mean you can actually *hear* it over the - "

" - *Let me please introduce myself,*" Felix interrupted, right in time with the third chorus of Sympathy for the Duke to come plunging in from the speakers. "*I'm a man of wealth and taste.*"

"Wow. Okay, I concede-"

"As I lay traps for troubadours,"

"Who get killed if they cup your waist,"

"You can stop now!"

But Felix was far from stopping. Singing along, he followed after the her the song, laughing through the lyrics as Chaeyoung plugged her fingers into her ears, wove around pillars to avoid him.

"So if you need me, have some courtesy,"

"Have some courtesy and some taste,"

By the time he caught up to her, they'd already reached the center point of the sidelines- a sloping hilltop somewhat uneven to the rest of the ground, where they could get a view of every ring and bar in sight.

"Where to next?" asked Felix, scoping out the view. "That is, assuming you're ready to go another round."

"Anything, if it means you'll stop singing in my ear." Chaeyoung's eyes landed on another target. "That vanara looks like he could be set loose."

"Plan on making it quick?"

"I think I'll be going into retirement after."

"Fair enough."

He started down the slope ahead of her. In spite of the the trusted medications it had been given to speed up the healing process, the cut in his leg chose that moment to flare up with the pressure put on it, causing the leg to buckle and the rest of him to sway under the strain.

"Fuck -"

An arm haphazardly caught his waist before Felix could properly fall. "Thanks, Chaeyoung, but I mean it, I'm okay."

"I know it's the height and name thing that gets people," said a voice that was most definitely *not* Chaeyoung, "but I really don't think we're that similar."

Felix looked round; Changbin was still holding him steady, looking at him with a face full of soft-cheeked, gentle-eyed concern just in time to, "*Baby, what's my name?*" while the real Chaeyoung stood smirking on the side with Sana, who was cheerfully sipping on someone else's piña colada. "Actually, I would beg to differ."

The demon rolled his eyes. "Course you would." Still, he helped him down the slope on steadier feet before releasing. "Your leg been bothering you any?"

"Not really- then again, I haven't been doing much to exert it." He nodded to Chaeyoung. "She's been doing all the work for me."

"It's been nothing hard," said Chaeyoung, soaking it up in faux-modesty. "Just taking out the biggest lunkheads we can find in this place and see what info I can extract from them while Felix texts it to the chat."

"Really?" asked Changbin, equal parts envious and impressed. "Awesome."

Sana considerately passed over her drink. "You need some of this. All we've done is beat a guy in a rigged blackjack game."

"Which was the best strike of improv we could have trusted," argued Changbin.

"What'd you find out?" Felix inquired.

"Well, we confirmed that everything we found beforehand out was correct, then-" A pair of leather clad girls passed by, eying him up. "Uh. We. Then. Then we found out he found work from Kai in '24, Lay joining the party in '26. He got the Sons of Typhon as a welcome gift- his own guard dogs to make his job easier."

"They're the ones who've been doing all the work behind the scenes," Sana revealed. "Sometimes they bring in other monsters with the promise of money. If they ever fuck up or go too far, he uses what Kai gives him to pay them off. He's just been sitting back and letting it happen."

"Sounds about right," amended Chaeyoung. "Anything about the ring? Momo and I have a bet going."

"Not much," Changbin admitted. "Only that he never takes it off."

"Although he did bring up one time where he forgot, and a whole execution got delayed until he put it back on," Sana offered.

"Knew it!"

"We sent in the audio clip a while ago, so Mina's probably downloaded it to the lacrima by now," said Changbin. "Looks like we got all our bases covered."

"Never had free time on a job before," mused Sana. "What should we do?"

"Cut a purse, steal a drink, cause some irreparable property damage," Felix proposed. "The probabilities are endless."

Of course, just as they started to consider them, Nayeon ran in breathless.

"Fuck the plan," she panted. "Fuck Kai, fuck ScreaM, fuck all of it. We're in deep shit."

"Oh, come on, can't we have *one* good moment?" Chaeyoung complained.

"What happened?" asked Changbin, hurtling over the context. "Wait- why isn't Chan with you?"

"He was- he was taken. Some fucking, tall, monochrome assholes, I don't know."

Free time plans were scrapped in an instant. "Do you know where he could be?" asked Felix. If Chan was in danger, he'd sprint across this whole tent- doctor's orders could choke.

"We were by the upper left quadrant when they took him, but I don't--"

A screech of static cut through her words, taking place of the eternal repeat of the Broadway soundstripe. "*Ladies and gentlemen,*" said a voice that moneyed and deep and lush and fluid all at once into a scratchy intercom. "*I hope you'll enjoy this brief interruption.*"

Above their heads, a black rectangle of space like a flatscreen opened up and flickered to life- revealing a circus arena with two mercenaries entering stage left and right, one dressed in white and

the other in black. Facing off against them were Chan and Minho, ready to fight.

The quintet stared up at it, unable to do anything else. "Shit."

It didn't *start* with Chan getting kidnapped.

He honestly didn't think it would, since Nayeon told him herself she would scream the entire discography to Spiritbox if he'd so much as trailed behind without telling her. When he'd been told to mostly just stay hidden because Kai had already seen his face, he'd simply been tempted to make a What We Do In The Shadows reference and obey. It was better to be flattered rather than annoyed that you were target No. 3 because your boyfriend was technically an escaped convict.

He thought he'd been doing a perfectly good job staying out of the sight of anyone too important. All Chan had done to risk it was shadow travel to get a better vantage point for five seconds- he'd even informed Nayeon.

But still, just as he was about to travel back to her, he'd *still* been grabbed by two firm, completely out of nowhere pairs of hands along with a whisper of, "you're coming with *us*" and dragged back through darkness.

All Chan had noticed was that it didn't feel like shadow, not like natural dark but as if someone had tore a gash through the light to mimic it before he was thrown roughly onto hard-packed dirt. When he'd been hauled up onto his knees, blinked his eyes open, they met a ring of bleachers, a single spotlight trained on him, tinnily playing carnival music combined with dirge, a funeral right for a beast who was going to be ridiculed while he did.

Naturally, Chan couldn't help but conclude that he was the butt of the joke. "And who should I thank for this warm welcome?"

"You've already made Kai's acquaintance," said the voice from behind, pitch dark and tenebrous. "He thought it'd be proper for you to learn how things really work around here."

"Why wouldn't he just come himself? Am I not important enough to fit in his schedule?"

"You should have more respect when referring to your executioners," snapped the voice before him, alabaster and ice. "Kai is currently dealing with the djinn- the one who calls *you* his lover."

"Oh. So I should see him in about ten minutes?"

"I just told you, Kai will not-"

"I was talking about my *boyfriend*, you ninny. He's a very efficient man."

"He will not be able to find you." The behind voice had found his way to the sidelines. "And once we're done with you, he won't be able to recognize you either."

"... I suppose you want me to ask what your names are?"

"Only by code of chivalry will we provide them." The voice before him stepped forward: a tall, gallant man dressed entirely in white drab, glaring at him under a sheaf of dark hair. "I am Sehun, cherub, soldier of the light."

"And I am Chanyeol," announced the voice who'd somehow managed to move in beside him: a slimmer figure dressed in black drab, pale hair spiky and slicked back. "Grim reaper, soldier of the dark."

"Together, we are SC, failure of no battles," they intoned in practiced, synchronized unison. "And we will be the ones to bring you to your doom."

Chan didn't have the energy to give their intro the applause it deserved. "And how many times have you rehearsed that?"

Sehun's jaw locked in a snarl, fuming, fumbling for a reply. "Enough to know that it will be the last thing you remember before you *perish*," growled Chanyeol for him.

"Well, actually, I'm pretty sure the brain flashes through a seven-minute reel of memories before death, so. Pretty sure I'll like that better."

"Bold of you to assume you won't be able to think of anything but the pain we will cause you," Sehun threatened.

"I've had a lot done to me over the years," Chan replied. "No offense, but I'm pretty sure this wouldn't be the worst way to go."

Chanyeol laughed. "Then we will take pleasure in proving you wrong."

The eerie echo of the circus music behind him giggled. Chan sat coolly back on his heels. "Do you actually *want* to kill me?"

"Is that a trick question to sway our motives?" challenged Sehun. "We are Kai's most trusted mercenaries- we are the ones who carry out his most valued kills."

So I am of value? "So you wouldn't rather just, y'know, kill who you wanted?"

"What kind of question is *that*?"

"My coven's whole thing is free will, so, just thought I'd capitalize."

"Our work is death, and it is holy," said Sehun, in some kind of backwards verse. "You should focus more on accepting yours."

"Kinda rather not, if that's okay?" Not when he was an entire undead creature whose sole purpose was to avoid that very fate.

"It is not something to be argued- your fate has already been decided," declared Chanyeol with pride. "Kai made it one of his first orders- you will find no sympathy from the duke."

"What does *that* mean?"

"It means-" Chanyeol dropped it; obviously, he'd been expected to understand. "Sympathy for the Duke? The song? From Moulin Rouge?"

Chan shrugged. "Sorry. More of West Side Story kind of guy. But not the original, the remastered- have you seen Ariana DeBose? Amazing."

"I'm not sure if you know how an execution works, vampire," Sehun cut in, patience wearing thin. "But we don't usually allow this much talking."

"Oh, I know how it works. I've just been able to escape them all before the actual sentence has been delivered." Chan looked up over their heads, as if searching for a clock. "Which means it's been about six minutes until go time."

"For *what*?"

The whoosh of a false wind, a swath of light cutting through around a man's brisk silhouette. "Out of my way."

Before the mercenaries could argue, Minho shoved them apart, sighed to a stop in front of Chan. "There you are. How do you always get yourself into these situations?"

"How else will I get you to pay attention to me?" Chan grinned, taking the hand that helped him up. "I was just about to make your introduction for you."

"I'm not late, am I?"

"Actually, I'd say you're right on time."

"Indeed you are," confirmed Chanyeol, holding up a clicker. When he pressed a button, the whole ring flared up.

The glare around them faded, instead bathing the big top with a hue of electric gold, a ring of overhead lights spiraling down from empty bleachers that still cheered their arrival.

"You didn't think you were going to have the luxury of a quiet death, did you?" taunted Sehun. "As of now, this dimension has been broadcast to the entire congregation gathered in the tent- meaning they, along with your coven, will be watching you die."

Minho frowned. "Well, that's unfortunate."

"Very unchivalrous," Chan added disapprovingly.

"The show is primed and ready." The cherub and reaper departed, circling them, like a pair ringmasters against two lions. "Whatever rebellion you have planned out shall be squashed, taking the forms of your deaths."

"They've really planned this out, haven't they?" noted Minho.

"And all for us," Chan reminded. "Almost sweet, isn't it? Your old boss making the effort."

"Oh, shut up." He dropped his hand, moved around him so that they stood back to back. "Sure would be a waste if we didn't appreciate it, though."

"What's this?" asked Chanyeol, amused. "Not willing to accept just yet?"

"How else are you going to give the people a show?" Minho challenged. "That's what they're here for, isn't it?"

"A rather grim spectacle." Sehun observed them, like the food on his plate was coming to life. "And yet you're willing to be a part of it."

"Can't think of a better way to end this," Chan responded. "Unless the undefeated would have it another way to uphold their thrones."

Chanyeol and Sehun's laughter bounced off the fabric, aimed for each other. "You two make a worthy match," admitted Sehun. "We shall see how long you last."

"They're pretty cocky," Minho murmured. "Think we can outdo them?"

Chan met the gleaming corner of his eye in a fanged smirk. "I don't know what we'd be if we couldn't."

The soldiers of light and darkness lunged, and they rushed in to meet them halfway.

Chan could almost hear the bated breath of their team as he met Chanyeol in a blitz of darkness and speed, a scythe as black as death itself wielded in his hands. He liked to get up close and personal, find weak spots with the point of his blade, whose slashes were as quick as they were deadly, flashes of dark following every swing- like what ignited every time Changbin clenched his fists- but in this case, it was what only the unluckiest of souls saw before they went.

Only years of sparring against every element imaginable with his coven kept Chan alive; though it was admittedly hard to aim a good punch when the guy you were fighting brought a blade to a fistfight, just the way it looked cutting through air was motivation enough.

"Nervous, are we, bloodsucker?" Chanyeol teased. "Meeting your reaper after long last."

"They signed off on the job a while back." Chan leaped back from another swing, watching the corner of his collar drift to the ground, nearly slicing his neck. "I kept getting away."

The reaper's lighthearted manner turned maliciously serious. "Not today, you won't."

A downward-cleaving slash moved Chan to the left, bolting into an opening and grabbing the shaft of the scythe, jamming an undercut into Chanyeol's abdomen before he was blown backwards, turning the motion into a back handspring that propelled him out of the ring. Chanyeol gave chase, racing after him to the bleachers. It was no Maria and Tony scene, but it would have to do.

"Get the fuck out, get the fuck out, get the fuck out," Chan muttered in anxious, rapid succession as he ran underneath them, diving into the shadow of the nearest shaft for a quick escape. If he was able to come out on top with even a *flicker* of an idea, then-

The whistle of sharp metal; a bright sting of pain sliced just below his shoulders.

Chan half stumbled, half tripped out of the shadow, into the beam which he'd traveled to meet. Chanyeol followed up behind- his scythe had slit a gap through the shadow he'd used to go after him.

"What, now? You didn't think vampires were the only ones who used the dark to their advantage, did you?"

My reaper's not giving up too easy this time. "Damn it."

As Minho met strike after strike of his opponent, the memory of the 'show' Sehun had informed him of just moments ago hummed in the back of his mind. If their coven was watching this, then surely they had to be cheering him on, too.

Against a douchebag with six equally pretentious wings on either side, they had better.

Minho had no idea how God, who was also supposedly watching from His pale high horse, had managed to create someone as wholeheartedly perfect as Felix but punted so hard on Sehun.

Thankfully, he'd only summoned up wings for the fight, but even without the lion's body it made one wonder what kind of mashup kick had He been on.

"You said you were a cherub, right?" Minho ducked under a blinding slash of light- lighter than cosmos, sharper than sunshine. "I thought those were the little winged babies that show up on your Valentine's Day cards."

"History has twisted our words around to make it seem so." Sehun pivoted, sliced through the air like he was moving through water. Minho could see it now- the ripple where his hand had been, how it seemed just a little dimmer than before. *He's stealing light from thin air rather than a source.* "Now you have no choice but to believe the truth."

Minho dodged again, hissing as his strike cut through the fabric on his shoulder and grazed skin. "Fucking Biblical accuracy," he seethed.

The way Sehun moved wasn't a dance but an art, the imitation of a cyclone. Where Minho's style was more defend/evade-and-let-the-opponent-tire-themself-out-before-finishing-them-off, the cherub moved around that, using blinding force to press further. Maybe there actually was some bite behind the bark.

"Coming through," the echo of Chan's voice murmured, a stir in the air at Minho's back, and the vampire himself leaped out of his shadow.

"Think you could give me a hand?" Minho grunted in the process of taking another hit. "It really fucking sucks over here."

"Not much better over here," Chan replied, ducking back from a slice that would have taken his head off but instead opened a cut across his cheekbone. "Haven't been able to get him down for more than three seconds."

"Shadow travel?"

"Guess who can use it too."

"Fuck that."

"Your attention should be with us," sneered SC, whose grins were as annoying as they were vicious.

Sehun thrust another blast of illumination at the same time Chanyeol swung his scythe. Minho and Chan ducked in unison, wiping the response from their minds.

Neither side was truly winning the fight, but one side was losing stamina much quicker than the other, and the problem was clear: clashing elements. So long as such similar fighters were pitted against each other, the bout was going to keep going until someone made a wrong move, slipped up, fucked up for the last time.

Minho nullified another attack from Sehun by burning it out with the starlight in his palms. "There is no way I'm going down for a guy who takes *pride* in using celestial ripoff magic for Kai."

"Maybe I could do it for you?"

"Do you mean-?"

"Switch things around, see how it works. You in?"

Their opponents advanced, pressing Minho and Chan back to back. "You always know how to think for the both of us."

Smirking, Chan dropped to a crouch and, dragging his fingers through the dirt, rose up and threw a handful in Chanyeol's face as Minho dove into the attack instead of escaping it, caught Sehun with a punch in the nose. While both were staggering back, the two switched places- before they could fully blink their eyes open, the tables had already turned.

An uproar from an enraptured crowd went up from an entire dimension away. The mercenaries were on their toes- before, they'd simply been playing, knowing the scales were tipped in their favor, built up on bluster and past victory and never meeting a real challenge to take them down. Now *they* were on the defensive- squared up against the polar opposites of themselves, opponents that weren't tied down or desperate or even minorly afraid, and it was new. But hey: if you couldn't beat the odds, you could change the game, and throw those scales right into a ring of fire.

With Chan, Sehun couldn't just work with flash; he was fighting someone who could pop out from any sliver of darkness he could fit a limb into, quicker than any Whack-A-Mole and hit harder with every quick-formed plan and strike, switching lenses from shadow to surface to strike into any weak point that hadn't been guarded in time: the seam of a shoulder, hip, sternum point and bladder all in one go.

With Minho, Chanyeol couldn't just focus on one point; he was up against a being who'd learned to thrive in captivity, derive natural light from even the darkest of dimensions, send each starlight bullet firing at him in speeds that not even the strongest of afterlife metals could defend, absorb its luminescence and strike with new power racing through him, blinding light through a battlefield of dark.

When Sehun was hurled to the ground after being chased through a pursuit that ringed around the whole big top, and Chanyeol impelled backwards from the force of a star to the solar plexus, Chan and Minho stood over them, cockiness retrieved, restored, and doubled.

"We..." coughed Sehun, Chanyeol rising beside him, "will *not* be ridiculed like this."

Minho's stare didn't divulge an ounce of pity for them. Palm glowing, he started forward to smite them both, then stopped. Turned to Chan, offered his hand to him with a smile. "Want to finish this off together?"

Chan, who had been waiting for the offer all this time, smiled back. "Like I'd ever say no."

He accepted his hand, drawing their figures together, closing their eyes as though listening to another one of their songs. But as the hold shifted, to the pads of their fingertips touched together, the whole environment changed with them, like the world tilting askew. The air became burning cold, the kind that chilled your skin and seared it at the same time. The lines of the shadow became blurred like an unfocused photograph, blending with the light around it, which dulled in return, smudging colors of gold and white and crimson and even steel gray until it turned into a misty, boundless seascape of twilight, swirling dusk, Polaris leading the rest of the stars into battle; a dimension coming apart.

Sehun, still immobilized but eyes flaring wide in open horror, had seemed to realize just what was going to happen. "Oh... oh, *no*."

Chanyeol grabbed his shirt, tried to pull him up. "We have to go!"

But they couldn't leave. Even if they were able to, it could have never been avoided. Once two monsters reached such a level of power, of trust in one another, it was able to take form in something else other than just chemistry- a spell that combined their strengths into a single indomitable wavelength of magic that was only ever reached every couple of decades, met by elements who complimented each other so perfectly it couldn't have been done in any other way.

The ground was shaking now, carnival illusion flickering, every bit of light and darkness retreating into the space made by Chan and Minho's hands, porcelain quartz rays and midnight obsidian ichor melding into one another to create something completely of its own, both star and shadow into impossible Stygian blue and gray like silk, like chaos, like a world without meaning. All their will, faith, and joint power honed down to a fine point, strengthened by a love that, beyond all measure and reason, hadn't withered a trace.

Then Minho and Chan opened their eyes, twined their fingers together, and closed the power inside. Eyes on their opponents, they drove their joined fist out like a cannon, and their nebula surged forth.

The Milky Way in all its glory dimmed, the sun blinked, and every creature lingering in the darkness felt a chill down their spines as an ordnance of everything grim and glowing fired off, straight through the arena, through the candy-cane striped labyrinth, through the mercenaries of black and white who couldn't have lasted another instant. Every being in the ScreaM tent covered their eyes, dodged out the way of the missile that still burned against their eyelids, only opened them when the world felt set in stone again, when only a charred stripe of ground remained as evidence of their survival, and the opening from which it had come wasn't even singed. No one else said a word, too stunned and scandalized to even think, but every stray kid in a mile radius muttered, "holy *fuck*."

Minho and Chan separated, examined the blackened trail of ground they'd created before them.

"Yup," Chan decided. "We still got it."

"Did we ever lose it's the question," murmured Minho, thoroughly satisfied. He turned his attention to the still rolling camera, looked Kai in his puny, furious, champagne-dripping face and said: "Was that the best you could do?"

Naturally, silence in response, but Minho treated it like a yes. "You've always underestimated me- hopefully now you see how stupid that is. I mean, really, taking the man I love to some dimension-cellar and setting two of your lackeys on him? What kind of amateur do you take me for?"

"I knew you'd find me," Chan piped.

"Not done, babe."

"Apologies, go on."

"We all know how you love your games, Kai, just because you've always won them- bent the rules with whatever favor you could nab to do it. But this one you're not gonna win. I'm not gonna let you- not this time." Minho was fully facing down the camera now. "I told you what I was going to do. I hope you believe me now."

Outside the dimension, the speakers playing the opening to Backstage Romance screeched through a squeal of feedback, glitched into stone. Speaking audio fast forwarded back to the beginning, clicked on.

"We already told you we know what you do for Kai, Suho," Sana's voice resounded "What we left out was that we know how you do it."

"And despite the picture you paint," said Changbin, "it's nowhere near as pretty as it sounds."

And the Burn Book-Godfather-Wolf of Wall Street floodgates were opened, spilling out every dirty detail on the inner workings of Kai's machine, the salacious turn of every cog out in words for the public to devour.

First were beforehand confessions from Minho and Momo, regaling tales on their own experiences under Kai's reign, the treatment of the monsters, the raids, the deaths, the bits and pieces they'd put together in the planning process. Then came the real action:

"You tell Kai's patrons that they're supporting a rehabilitation center for monsters who are using their abilities for evil, rather than the slave work you know well that they do... startup money to use... keep one half for whatever investment or gamble you choose, and give the other half to your beloved gang to play with... They're the ones who've been doing all the work behind the scenes... bring in other monsters with the promise of money. If they ever fuck up or go too far, he uses what Kai gives him to pay them off... just been sitting back and letting it happen."

One by one, those leather jackets, who'd strutted about with so much pride, slunk away behind the bars. Suho, who still had leaves clinging to his clothes, stood gaping like a Edvard Munch painting, darting hasty looks at the patrons who were edging away from him.

"Monsters in cages... Their tattoo- it siphons their power... flickers when Kai drains more... his tattoo takes the power that he steals from others and converts it into a source he can live on."

Even more truths, gasps of shook-up patrons, filthy revelations and audio clips from scenes that couldn't have been faked. Kai's voice, charismatic, unmistakable:

"I have known you were here since the minute you arrived. Don't you think I could have done something about that?"

A whole circus of people listening to the behind the scenes, to their sponsor and savior himself telling an escapee of his dominion he'd never belonged to anyone else- with or without the lamp.

"I was never yours to begin with."

"And that's where you're wrong, dearest."

The recordings hit a stop, and, with nowhere else to look, the congregation precariously returned their attention to the screen, where Minho and Chan stood side by side, smiling right at them.

"I hope you enjoyed that brief interruption," said Minho sweetly. "Do with it as you will."

Chan stepped into his shadow, and the camera shook, like it had been gripped suddenly, and plummeted to the floor, glitching out to black.

He traveled down from the ceiling, dusting off his hands to the beginning symphony of a riot happening on the other side. But

before Chan could go out and join it, Minho caught him by the back collar of his shirt. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. You're not going out there."

"That was kinda the plan, wasn't it? Infiltrate, read Kai's crimes, start shit and hopefully end it?"

"I have a more dignified idea."

Digging the car keys out of his pocket, Minho clicked the fob. A rumbling *vroom* like a growling tiger responded, and straight through the walls of the dimension the SUV plunged into the arena, ready to ride.

Chan goggled at it, mouth hanging open. "How did you- *how* did it do that?"

"Animation glyph Mina and I've been working on. Brings an inanimate object to life for a period of time, and enhances its travel abilities to open portals through cheap, finicky warlock dimensions," Minho explained as he climbed into the passenger's seat, Chan dumbly catching the key's in the driver's. "I figured something like this would happen- Kai plans predictable surprises, and we'd need an efficient way out anyway. Jihyo's got her own." Chan had stuck his slack-jawed, oogling eyes to Minho, who simply clicked his seatbelt on. "Well, buckle in, dummy. We're going to be busting out of a whole other dimension- the impact'll knock your fangs in."

"You are everything I have ever wanted."

"Let's not say things we don't mean."

- and the SUV burst through the crack and back with a bang into the real world, trampling the charred earth beneath it, sending people scrambling out of its way, a chariot of revolution.

Megaphone in hand, Chan yelled to their team, "Time to step out!"

Burn The House Down - AJR

*Everybody (Backstreet's Back) - The Backstreet Boys

*Us and Them - Pink Floyd

*Sweet Caroline - Neil Diamond

*Not a misspelling; ser was the title given to knights to be referred to with their surname.

And yes, in case you didn't figure it out, I had MinChan do a Unison Raid. Why, you may ask? Because I wanted to.

BLACK MIRROR

Chapter 16: BLACK MIRROR

The riot has begun, my motherfuckers. Let's dive in and see just how epically it shall end.

Black mirror

babe babe babe

off

Us in the mirror...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"Step out!"

The cry sounded out for miles through the canyon, heard in all of Colorado. For an instant, it froze everybody in the tent.

And then, to the vibrant, electrified salsa chorus of a remastered Bad Romance, all nine rings broke loose.

"Ra-ra, ah-ah-ah, roma, ro-ma-ma,"

"Gaga, ooh-la-la, want your bad romance,"

Having now heard of Kai's true natures, his rich patrons were either grabbing their shit and leaving, trashing the area - one prime example being the man who threw an entire roulette wheel like a

frisbee, checked on it after he'd hit a woman in a blue dress, and realized he'd actually won - or fighting back against the Sons of Typhon who hadn't fled and the guards whose brainwash-twisted loyalties had been too fixed to waver.

Kai's captured- the ones who'd quite honestly had enough of all this - proceeded to shake it up in every possible definition: stealing cars and ripping holes through the ceiling and walls to properly fuck off, smashing bars and raising glasses and knocking down pleasure tents like dominos, using all the pent-up rage that the years had instilled in them to pummel every being who tried to stand in their way.

"Cease fire!" Kai shrieked, pulling himself to the top of a nearby bar (one that was still standing, anyhow). His suit was tattered silk, soaked with every number of offended cocktails possible, hair a disheveled catastrophe, eyes blown wide and crazed. Any wisp of silver he summoned wasn't nearly strong enough to combat a whole collapsing village. "Order! I demand order!"

The demand was upended by the ajatar, who'd taken to hosting a chicken fight against two Sons of Typhon on a revived mapinguari's shoulders, screaming through miles of musky, whiskey-tinged, burnt sugar smelling air: *"FUCK YOU!"*

It was full-tilt, helter-skelter, taking-down-the-asylum, literally-eat-the-rich madness, clawing the cloth walls to ribbons and smashing forties on the ground all rapidly unraveling to the Broadway soundtrack of the messy, romantic starving artists of the Montmartre blowing the roof off the place, rising and collapsing under flashing limelight.

Which also made it kind of the perfect cover up to get away with a crime.

Changbin was already starting after the car. "Take it that means we're out of here." Felix accepting the hand he reached out, they

chased after their way out flanked by Chaeyoung, who'd intercepted Mina on her way out of the sound booth.

The few steps they'd made it onto the decayed tire trail MinChan had left behind were cut off by the guards who weren't ready to give up their positions, weapons pointed and fists clenched, power pulsing and ready to be wielded.

"Almost forgot I haven't landed a blow on any of those guys," muttered Mina, flexing her fingers alive, swirling violet mist around her arms.

"Can't have that on our conscience." Changbin dropped into position, hands already taped up at the ready. "Whaddaya say, sunshine? Rip and tear?"

On the other side of him, Felix beamed. "Until it's done!"

"Y'all did not just quote Doom," Chaeyoung judged, bare seconds before she gave in and socked the nearest leather jacket in the face.

Meanwhile, Baekhyun stumbled out of the toppled pleasure tents after Hyunjin, who'd used the distraction of Kai's public unveiling to ditch. "Jin!" He grabbed his wrist. "Where're you going- I need to get you somewhere safe!"

Hyunjin shot the tiniest of affronted glances at his hand. "Change of plans."

The Colorado River rushed in his ears, flowing into his hands. At his command, it snapped like a whip over Baekhyun's grip, forcing his release. Hyunjin flew back, funneling the water in a churning stagnant whirlpool around him.

Baekhyun took it in, realized, the shock on his face souring into a sneer. "Siren."

Hyunjin grinned wickedly. "There it is."

By the sound system, Seungmin pulled Jeongin aside as a flying slot machine came hurtling towards a sodden pinstripe suit just four feet away. "I feel like it's time for us to go."

"I was considering that," said Jeongin, "and then I thought 'no, I want to live.'"

"Chaeyoung literally crossed the whole tent to get Mina and she lived."

"That's Chaeyoung. She literally DDT'd a nephilim."

"Chan and Minho don't seem to have circled back to us," Seungmin noted. "Guess we'll just have to wait for a green light."

The next light they saw wasn't green, but a blur of ash blue; Dahyun busting down the door to the sound system with a boulder gauntlet that would have made Toph jealous. When she saw them, her expression swerved into a double take. "What the fuck are you two still doing here?"

Jeongin elbowed Seungmin, who elbowed him back. "Waiting for an out?" the gumiho replied uncertainly.

"Here's your out." Pushing them ahead, they weren't even allowed to ask before the sound of a rock breaking through the ground erupted beneath them, and a slab of earth jutted under their feet, rocketing the boys into the air.

For a moment they were weightless, getting the briefest bird's eye view of a maelstrom mural- then, of course, gravity took over, and all that came crashing down onto the canvas of a boxing ring.

Their bodies bounced like rubber balls, tumbling to a stop against the ropes. When their ears stopped ringing, they realized it was one of the only ones left unoccupied by ScreaMgoers who'd taken their unbridled bloodlust to the rings.

Jeongin pushed up on his feet, cleared his throat. "Romeo?"

Seungmin pulled himself up by the corner pad, stretched out. "After you, Juliet."

One in the form of a fox and the other with furry anthropomorphic haunches that were much better suited for chasing a moving vehicle, they bounded up and out of the ring.

Over side-tipped tables and the heads of entire beings they leaped, from the ropes of boxing rings to bar rooftops, like frogs to a lily pad. In blinks and flashes they could spot their allies fighting with them: ChangLix and MiChaeng ringed by enemies but holding strong, Jeongyeon in lethal fox form ripping apart any fool challenger who came close alongside Nayeon, who'd found her way up one of the band stages with a microphone in her hands, the banshee in her howling her way through Master of Puppets*, Tzuyu bulldozing everything in her path on an emerald-scaled serpentine lower half spinning and stabbing a golden spear, Momo raging through the field on spindly spider legs, using them like swords, Jisung and Sana whipping around roots and vines like two vernal octopi, and Hyunjin singing along to *"I want your horror, I want your design,"* somehow keeping his tune while one-on-oneing Baekhyun, who, despite having been so taken with him before, sparked blue from his fingers, sending projectiles of mountain stone shooting at him.

But the funny thing was, not one of them looked the least bit threatened. Even Mina looked like she was having a blast, Scarlet-Witching a guard all the way into next week like the Mother herself wouldn't have dared. One might've thought they'd done it all before, just yesterday, and came back again just for the laughs.

"Heads up!" Jeongin yelled; right in front of their path was a shaggy, enormous, loinclothed minotaur (possibly a cousin of Pasiphae's son) who'd seen the fray around him and decided he'd wanted in.

Dropping into the ring, the beast charged immediately, flailing meaty fists that no longer cared about holding back in the name of fixed

bets, horns aimed for their abdomens. It had to be said- no matter how many times they dodged, he just kept coming back.

“D’you think it’s your jacket?” Seungmin called to a human Jeongin, who flipped him the bird from atop a corner pad.

After dodging a few more rams, it became clear that they were only participating in an aimless game of Marco Polo: the bull man was operating on smell alone to make up for shit sight and hearing, snuffling behind a brass nose ring before every move. With two more beings in the ring who operated on all their own senses just fine, the boys figured they could give the brute what he wanted.

“Braincells, converge!” Jeongin hollered, and flung himself like an eagle off the pad.

In the time it took for him to flip midair and slam a pink combat bootprint into the minotaur’s back, Seungmin leapt with his transformed fist reared back, catching the beast right in his snout. He bellowed in rage, grabbing out at every space used to dodge. But lightning-quick teamwork and additional canine flexibilities jumping around from rope to rope and landing blows at the speed of lightning made a match that couldn’t be bested by sheer muscle- in some cases, friendship truly was magic.

The minotaur, shaky on two hooves, was teetering under the top heavy mass that hadn’t taken this much speed in a long while. In a duet finale for the ages, Jeongin and Seungmin took two fists and rammed it into one smashing undercut that lifted his feet off the ground in a droning, mournful, “*Mooooo*,” and landed him flat on his back with a forceful, ground-shaking thud.

Just as Jeongin was suggesting a victory selfie with Seungmin’s Polaroid, a black SUV pulled up next to them, Chan rolling down the windows.

Beside him, Minho gave a long, low whistle. “Hope you two gave as good as you got.”

"We were taught by the best," replied Seungmin, throwing open the door and holding down the ropes so Jeongin could take his seat. As the car started, he jumped in after.

"Where to, MinChan?" asked Jeongin sweetly.

"If we head east, we hit the town. Turn around, and we lead anyone with a brain following us to Hell In Heaven," replied Chan. "For now, we're just getting out."

"Next round's gonna be a rough one," Minho warned. "All limbs inside the vehicle, keep your heads down, and strap in. It's gonna be a bumpy ride."

The engine revved, picking up speed. On it's left, a crowding ring of leather jackets and windbreakers hit the dirt one by one, four at a time.

In their rowdy ring, the quartet of duos fought like it was a party-knocking back one after the next, each fall of a body a beat drop, staying on their feet in time for the key change.

"How many was that?" Changbin shouted over the tumult.

"Twelve for me!" called Chaeyoung.

"Same for me!" added Felix.

"You're only on twelve?" Mina arced her arms outward- a gust of amaranthine power four more reptilians. "I just got nineteen."

Chaeyoung grinned, both teasing and proud. "Show-off."

"Add up the tally later." Changbin shook out his hands, the bandages on his knuckles stained with blood. "We got a new wave coming."

And a wild wave it was- guards who'd let them in wielding magic and tent pitches sharpened into stakes, Sons of Typhon who knew that they were behind all this.

The first one came at Changbin with the sharp end of a broken bottle, swinging and stabbing out as if it were a sword. Changbin shoulder-rolled, dropped to a crouch for Felix to blast them out of the stratosphere with a light-fueled judo kick. The second would have stuck Felix with a razor-clawed grab had Changbin not shot up from the ground like an angry gopher and unhinged his jaw with a heroic uppercut.

Through the next sixteen adversaries, the demon and angel amplified their tallies together, a revolving carousel of rippling ink sucker punches and blazing pearl torpedos kicking ass without taking names and watching each other's backs. Two serpents who'd tried to tag-team split off on either side of them were taken out at the same time- Changbin ducking under Felix's arm knocking down one while Felix himself pummeled the other into the nearest pillar.

When the serpents screamed in unison, they checked with each other, just to make sure.

"Did you just-?" Changbin started.

"Did we-?" started Felix at the same time.

"*Shit*," hissed Mina, just as they started laughing.

Through the gaggle of chaos, she'd spotted a sliver of clarity, and the worst kind: MinChan, having zoomed past, brought Kai to what little senses he possessed, made him had start gathering his real ones, sending them outside after the motorcycles that remained- the rumble of cars and trucks echoed the ones who'd already hopped to it, and the warlock's unmistakable yell of, "Roll out the tank!"

Changbin punched the lights out of the nearest opponent in sheer frustration. "Of course that motherfucker has a tank."

On his left, Chaeyoung cried out in pain; she'd caught a crossbow arrow deep in her shoulder and pushed Mina out of the line of fire- she'd seen it coming before any of them. "*Fuck, my arm.*"

Mina, who had never so much as frowned in anyone's general direction before, glowered rays of hellfire in the direction of the shot. "That's *it*."

Grabbing the raised stake out of someone's hand, she yelled, "*Murusidium!*" and plunged the point into the earth, invoking the Mother in all her terror. Like a carpet shaken out, the impact sent a shockwave of combustion through the ground, sending everyone in a mile radius sky high, the cracks that webbed the earth glowing like neon amethysts shining through.

With their enemies now gone, Felix swallowed. "I feel like she could kill us if she wanted to."

"She would," Chaeyoung whispered, out of awe rather than fear.

A gust of wind, the sound of- no, not a breeze, fucking *wings* flapping to a stop overhead. They looked out in time to see Jihyo, sword in hand, armored up and gold-feathered wings protruding from her back, a valkyrie ready to rock and reap. "Everyone alright over here?"

"Mostly," Chaeyoung replied, wincing as Mina tugged at the arrow. "Minari did her cool witch spell thing, so for now we're good."

"Gandalf but lesbian," Felix chimed.

Jihyo allowed it. "Grab a ride- we're heading north down the canyon to lead off Kai and his followers."

"Can we follow you?" asked Felix. "Minho and Chan don't seem to remember we exist yet."

"Just so long as you can keep up, I can lead you to them." Beating her wings higher, Jihyo pointed her sword ahead. "Stay close to the walls, but keep your eyes on me."

Righting Chaeyoung on her feet, Mina lead her by the hand after Jihyo, Felix preparing to follow when he realized the demon hadn't moved. "Bin, come on. Let's go."

"You go ahead. I'm staying here."

"Didn't I literally fix your ribcage less than a week ago? You can't keep doing this just because you *want* to get into fights."

"That's not the deal! Look." All around them, their fallen foes were shaking off their wounds, looking for the one who had blown them off. "They'll be on you in minutes. I can hold them off, let you take a safer route."

"Changbin, *no*."

"Changbin, yes."

"At least let me help you."

"That'd defeat the whole purpose of doing this. I want to keep you safe- let me do that."

"Felix!" Mina called. Jihyo was already aiming her sword at a rising guard. "Let's go!"

The angel's feet shifted uneasily, too stubborn and unwilling to move. Changbin offered a light half smile, as if they were back home on the sparring field. "I'm the muscle, remember, sunshine? I got this. I'll catch up with you- promise."

Felix held his gaze with a hold so tender and delicate it blazed through the artificial world of the chaotic carnival. "You'd better not make me wait," he threatened, letting it linger over his shoulder before taking off after Jihyo and MiChaeng.

Changbin watched him go for as long as he dared, the fire sparking a fighting flicker of invigoration inside of him. "I won't," he vowed to

his back, turning himself towards the zombielike enemies stumbling into his trajectory.

As he did, however, Changbin saw Jisung in a running flash of blue hair and wary flannel and denim, glancing every which way, looking for someone. Someone who, coincidentally was too caught up in his own battle to see anyone else.

Hyunjin had been both surprised and pleased to find that, surface attraction out of the way, Baekhyun actually made a decent challenger. A little brash, sure, but he'd come to learn that was part of pretty much every earth monster's fighting style. Or maybe that was just because he'd honey trapped him into giving up information- that could especially be inferred from Baekhyun yelling, "You honey trapped me into giving up information!"

"Please," Hyunjin had laughed. "It wasn't like you were putting up a fight."

That roused another spritz of voltaic, angry blue sparks from his fingertips, another spike of earth tendrils shooting up from the ground, jutting at him with rapier-like jabs and force. Hyunjin wove his body of water faster around him, a lethal ring of a flash flood lashing out against each strike, slicing off points and dousing his opponent's vision with whitewater spray.

Baekhyun spat a short stream of water. "I can't believe I thought you actually liked me!"

"Don't feel too bad- you were bored, I was scheming. We both just took advantage of a thing that happened when it happened."

"You did- I was not *bored*!"

"Not anymore, obviously." Hyunjin smiled, dazzling behind the spindrift of his hurricane. "I came along and woke you up."

"Shallow *rake*."

So much for absolutely stunning. "Never heard that one before."

"I should have planted you on a stake the moment I saw you."

"And you didn't," Hyunjin snarled, no longer having to play pretend. *Instead you judged a book by its cover and found something you didn't want.* "How does it feel to pay the price?"

It wasn't the first time he'd fought someone who'd flipped out on finding out what he was, but it was the first time it mattered. If he was going out fighting a converted bootlicking mountain an, he might as well start digging his grave right this minute. That wasn't part of the plan, but neither was hopping on board with Minho and Chan without getting some dirt under his fingernails and letting out the repulsion he'd held in with forced smiles and tinny laughs, making sure Baekhyun never got too close to the phone in his back pocket.

So, for that to be properly done, he had to pull out the big guns.

"Too high, can't come down..."

From the boxing rings he'd been searching, Jisung looked up. It wouldn't have mattered if Hyunjin been miles away; he would have heard him halfway across the world.

Eyes cutting through the chaos, he saw the fight: Hyunjin's swirling maelstrom and the patupaiarehe's earthen blades crossing and cutting at each other. The patupaiarehe struck with blind rage, most of his attacks not even hitting Hyunjin, who, that schematic clever fuck, had made sure not to let him do by keeping his hurricane in a constant flurry. He was even singing Toxic, the rushing waves sounding out a coarse instrumental. For it to be heard so clearly from so far away, he must've been really feeling it.

So much so he couldn't see the patupaiarehe's next move.

It wasn't another earth attack. He didn't move his hands at all, but pivoted his stance on the ground with a stomp powerful enough send

a crack running jaggedly at terrible speed towards Hyunjin, who couldn't even see it. Who was so confident, so busy spinning his water ring, so caught up in his song that he didn't even know what was coming up right under his nose.

"Do you feel me now?"

There was no time to think about it. "Hyunjin!"

Jisung ran through the boxing rings, past the other obscure brawlers, and into the hurricane, taking the siren in his arms, stepping over the crack meant to swallow him up and summoned a colossal whiplash root that projected them into the air.

Suddenly Hyunjin's breath knocked out of his lungs; his body was held in the arms of another. He blinked his eyes open wide, and his heart gridlocked in his throat.

Time froze, and all he could see was the profile of Jisung's face: the line of his jaw smudged with debris like charcoal definition, split lip of red copper inlay, blue hair fluttering into his eyes, those forested, spring green eyes looking only out and ahead, like a hero from days no one was around to remember, a painting Hyunjin would never have all the materials for. *With the taste of your lips, I'm on a ride...*

Jisung let them plummet only for a second before another behemoth root split the earth, followed by another and another, acting as stepping stones before he landed them on the ground, Hyunjin's back leaning against a wood pillar.

"Are you okay?" asked Jisung. He looked like the archetype of his kind, a man willing to give, eyes soft as a bed of grass, voice genuine and summer warm, solid as the trunk of the oldest tree in the wood.

Hyunjin could faintly hear Baekhyun shouting in the back of his mind; he couldn't even remember what that guy looked like. "Yeah." *Good Lord, it was so much easier just to hate you.*

The rumble of an engine, and the Buzzkill Bitches came along to ruin the vibe.

"If one of you is dying, I'd prefer they do it in the car," Minho told them. Felix was already pulling the door open. "We can play Another One Bites the Dust* on our way out of here."

Pulling himself to his feet (Hyunjin had some dignity after all), they weren't even fully inside before Chan pulled back out into the tent.

"That looked intimate," mused Jeongin next to Seungmin, who was trying modestly not to look as smug.

"I'm gonna waterboard you in your sleep one of these days." But Hyunjin still caught another soft-eyed glance from Jisung, yet another flashback from that blasted night at the bar, only lasting a second before they both looked hastily out the window.

Live or die, there was no way Hyunjin was going to forget about that.

Until then, however, he could remember just what it was like to be in a car with a Chan on a mission.

"Go left!" Seungmin yelled from the backseat, GPS in hand. "Wait no- *right!*"

"Which one?" Chan screamed.

"Either of them!"

"We should be turning around," Felix objected. "Changbin could be waiting for us right this second!"

"What if he's dead?" Jisung asked nobody, head in his hands, foot drumming through the floor. "What if he's dying and we're not there?"

"I'm sure Changbin's fine," Minho assured him. "Now Jeongin, stop taking pictures, we're in a car chase."

"But the lighting's good!"

"Unless you want to lose it out the window, you can make that the least of your concerns."

Mumbling under his breath, Jeongin stuck his phone back in his pocket.

"Hang on, guys," Chan warned, rapidly switching hands on the steering wheel as they listed severely to the left. "This one's gonna be tight."

"Oh, *God*," moaned Hyunjin.

Now, normally Chan was a very cautious, mindful driver- it was a qualification he had to have in order to safely slog seven different species representatives up to the edge of the world. But at this moment, the laws of traffic didn't apply. It didn't matter how many times they swerved out of the way to avoid hitting someone; they had to have run over at least thirteen feckless dwarves just on their way to the exit.

"I can't tell if that was a person or a structure, and that concerns me," Chan said to another thump under wheels.

"If that was another body, I'm denying knowledge of any of you," Seungmin informed him.

"Could've been Changbin and we'd have no idea," mused Minho.

"Payback for all the times I called him Gimli," Jisung considered gloomily.

"Some of them want to use you,"* HyunLix sang. Stress was worked out in funny ways, even if it was singing along to 2019's finest jukebox musical. *"Some of them want to be used by you."*

"Some of them want to abuse you, some of them want to be abused."

Glimpses of their Twice allies running along the walls behind the cover of the wreckage egged them on, farther and farther towards the exit: a wide swath of blue skies and rust red canyons made visible by drawn apart red-white cloth, plus a checkered starting line most likely meant for the racers. But still no sign of Changbin.

"If we jump out now, I can bring us high enough to scope him out," Jisung schemed with an attentive Felix.

"Holy shit, that's him," Seungmin blurted, staring through the back window. Chan almost ran into a slot machine looking over his shoulder with the rest of them- Minho pulled him back onto the path.

Changbin wasn't running, fighting, or even touching the ground. He was swinging himself from pillar to pillar after them, the closest to flying any demon would ever get.

"Tarzan is sweating in his dreads," Jeongin quipped, snapping a photo with Seungmin's Polaroid.

Hyunjin squinted through the window. "I think he's trying to say something."

And that he was; unheard amidst all the commotion, but the same word, shouted over and over.

"Sunroof," Seungmin read, eyes flaring wide with realization and horror. "Sunroof, sunroof- shit -open the *sunroof!*"

"Jesus fucking Lord, oh my God," Chan cursed rapidly, not even bothering to keep his eyes on the road anymore.

"All the *stars*," Minho muttered, unlatching the top.

"We don't *know* if he was saying sunroof," Hyunjin tried to mediate. "I thought he was saying undo!"

"Undo *what?*"

"I don't know, this entire day? I would!"

"Speaking of Baekhyun, did you off him?" asked Felix.

"I-" Distracted glance at Jisung. "Did not get around to that, no."

"Great- now we have a loose end!" complained Seungmin. "He's Kai's lapdog *and* into you- he'll be on our trail in seconds!"

"Don't judge me for being pretty, Seungmin."

"Why are you slowing down?" Minho screeched at Chan. "That's the last thing you should be doing!"

"Binnie's gonna jump at some point- I don't want him to faceplant on the dirt!"

"And I don't want him to leave a Changbin-sized *dent* on the roof of our car!"

"He's not gonna-"

A heavy bodily *thump* banged on the roof of the car. The whole backseat screamed.

Minho threw his face in his hands. "*Ughh.*"

"Look out!" Jeongin yelled, pointing out at the exit dead ahead, which started right off the slightest of hills, which launched them out to the chorus ending of Bad Romance wheels flying off the ground.

If it had been a movie, their freeze-frame leap into the sun would have been Chan gripping the wheel, Minho clutching the armrests for dear life, Changbin clinging like a persistent tick to the ceiling, Jeongin beaming like a maniac, Jisung and Seungmin wrapping each other midscream, Felix with his air blown back pressed into his seat by the sheer force of gravity, and Hyunjin checking out the window to see if God had gotten any other creative ideas.

The SUV hit the ground, the boys jostled in their seats, and Changbin hurtled inside headfirst, crashlanding on his back.

"*Fuck*," he cringed, rubbing his head. "I haven't had my back blown out like that since-

A blaring car horn finished his sentence. Every head in the car turned to find Jihyo pulling in next to them, her own white BMW jam-packed with the other members of Twice, Tzuyu waving from the front seat.

"Get ready to pick up the pace," the valkyrie told Chan through the intercom they'd installed. "Kai's getting his loyalists together on rides for the race he promised."

"We'll be ready," he promised. "Where will we meet you?"

"Drive up to the end of the Book Cliffs and round back to Hell In Heaven, only once everyone's gone. We'll try to lead most of the herd away."

"Be there with bells on."

"Over and out." Jihyo swerved off to the left, and the last thing they saw was Dahyun throwing open the sunroof and blasting a barrage of Roman candles out the opening, encouraging the motorcycle gangs that veered after them.

"Well, gents," Jisung started as Felix and Hyunjin helped Changbin back into his seat. "It's a good day as any for a car chase."

"There's so many of them," Chan murmured, the dread already getting to him. "How'll I get us out in time?"

"Chan." Minho latched onto his arm, deadly serious. "Mad Max." Code: *floor it*.

"No," Seungmin started, fumbling to tighten his seatbelts as the other rumbled their panicked dissent. "No, Minho, *no*."

But Chan was regaining hope. "Fury Road?"

"Sandstorm scene."

Felix and Jisung were already testing the strength of the child locks. Changbin was starting up for the sunroof again, and SeungIn looked to be experimenting just how fast one could dip out through the back.

"My immune system isn't ready for this!" Hyunjin wailed, shrieking away with the wind as they sped off into the canyon.

The smarter half of their chasers followed, kicking up a storm of red dirt under legions of fast-moving wheels. While the ScreaM tent was left in the dust, the real party carried out on the open road.

An assignment the boys took quite literally.

"Popping bottles in the ice,"* Jisung rapped along to their hype playlist, ChangLix stifling laughter as Jeongin filmed, *"Like a blizzard,"*

"Jeongin, get the hell off Tiktok, we're not dying for an audience," Chan reprimanded, not easing up on the gas one bit.

"When we drink we do it right, getting slizard, sipping sizzurp in my ride-"

"What the hell even *is* that?" Minho asked.

"The beverage of the gods," Seungmin answered.

"Now I'm feeling so fly, like a G6,"

"Hyunjin, what're we up against?" Chan called back.

"A good chunk of the Sons of Typhon," Hyunjin reported, having used his own phone for the academic purposes of a rearview mirror behind them. "Branded monsters, sideline rich people who wanted in

on the fun, and some of those mortals who call themselves Holy Rollers."

Considering their odds, Chan deemed it as, "Not too bad. Doesn't sound like the whole tent. Jisung?"

"Yeah?"

"Give us a boost."

Jisung thrust a hand out to Seungmin. "Ear plugs."

Seungmin slapped them into his palm. "Give them back in good shape."

The spriggan shot double finger guns. "Gotcha." He jammed the plugs in as far as they could go without getting stuck and shut his eyes, hands resting above the leather of the seat. "At this time, I will now ask everyone to please keep their arms and legs inside the vehicle--"

"Extra ass," Hyunjin muttered.

"- as well as kindly shut the fuck up. Buckle in, sit back, and enjoy the ride."

"Been nice knowing you, Felix," Seungmin whispered, grasping the angel's hand over the seat.

Jisung let his breath go, and the earth below rumbled; the roots beneath them were pulsing to life. The center of gravity shifted every which way, jerking them up and down and sideways. Out the windows, if one were to find a stable viewing point, they could have seen pale, chlorophyll green roots bursting out of the ground like octopus tentacles, the Kraken of the earth.

The pirates, being on wheels instead of aboard a ship, reacted wildly, swerving like mad to escape, pulling off to the side, some even trying out in a definitely illegal backwards gear, but it was no

use. To a symphony of skidding tires, thunderclaps of a breaking surface and terrified screams, the Kraken's mighty earthen arms thrashed about, curling around motorcycles and chucking them into the dirt, the shrubs, even the canyon bluffs for some unlucky few. Torn sigils of a winged man screaming on a snake's body and devil horns ringed by a golden halo flew by and tumbled away in the red dust, defeated as their former wearers.

Gradually, the roots retracted, first wave vanquished, and the boys whooped.

"Way to go, Sungie!" Changbin cheered.

But maybe those ear plugs *had* been shoved too far in- instead of opening his eyes and releasing his hold, Jisung lifted his hands, brought the roots directly underneath them.

"Jisung?" Chan tried to shout back, voice unsteady as the steering wheel started to lock up, car lifting off the ground.

"This wasn't part of the plan, dickbag!" Hyunjin screeched, gripping onto the door handle.

Jisung opened an eye over a cryptic grin before closing up again; it might have been a wink.

Sealing their fates in an envelope with a kiss, he launched them screaming out of the canyon shadows. (Seungmin would deny holding on to Jeongin as life support for the rest of the ride.)

The car hit the ground roughly as a boulder rolling off a cliff, rattling their teeth inside their skulls with every bounce until the wheels regained traction.

"*Damn* it, Jisung!" snarled Minho at the spriggan, who was far too self-satisfied.

"You asked for a boost, didn't you? I don't see anyone out here right now."

However heavily unconventional the idea had been, it couldn't be denied that he was right. The way it looked now, they could have been cruising on down the canyon just for some afternoon sightseeing.

It was safe to say the fireball ruined all illusions of that.

"*Fuck!*" Felix shrieked, jolting away from his window seat.

"You just *had* to speak, didn't you?" Seungmin accused.

"I didn't *know* Pitbull would throw his calling card at our heads!" Jisung retorted

"Is that another power of yours?" Jeongin inquired. "It keeps happening."

Their second wave had come in the form of a hellhound pack- seven in all, not the domesticated kind like Berry, but a ghastly cross between a Tibetan mastiff and the planet's first direwolves. Leading them was none other than Chaeyoung's old opponent, the chimera; buddy was still bruised up from his time in the ring, but given he was now fully transformed with two heads, one lion and goat whose snapping jaws were already glowing with another fireball, as well as a live snake tail spitting rivulets of poison to top it off, he had the spirit.

"Alright," sighed Minho, rubbing his hands together, lobbing a ball of sunlight in his palm like a baseball. "Let's get this over with."

"Wait!" Felix blurted. "You don't have to hurt them- at least not really!"

"Didn't that chimera *just* shoot a fireball at your window?"

"*And* spit acid through the car?" added Hyunjin.

"We don't know if that was-" *Hiss*; a tiny smoking hole next to his seat where the protection glyphs hadn't reached. "Fine. It's acid. But still- they're just branded by Kai's sigil. He's draining them right this second. If we take them out, we're no better than him."

"I'm not the only one who hates the shit out of it when he's right, am I?" Jeongin asked the car. "Anyone?"

Changbin held up a hand for quiet. "What do you suggest instead?"

"Nothing lethal- just some quick shuteye, sedation, maybe. It'll keep Kai from using them as weapons *and* keep the fire and poison away from our car. That much we can do, right?"

With the chaos they had caused already it was a good way to keep the red out of their ledger. "This whole operation was meant to spare their lives anyway," Chan amended. "Lucky for us, I think we've got just the thing."

Reaching under the dashboard, he felt around and pulled out an antique rifle, wood polished to a shine and inlaid with golden filigree.

"Please don't tell me you got that from Alabama," Jisung prayed.

"We don't talk about Alabama. This is an astra from another trip- Minho's and my 1978 anniversary."

Minho dropped a hand over his heart. "You remembered Montenegro?"

"Would never forget." He handed the rifle off to him. "Lix, you mind giving us some ammo here?"

"Gladly." Felix cupped his hands, as if containing a dove, but he released a bulb of floating light instead. Sending it into the air like a balloon, he sent it over to Minho.

An astra was no ordinary weapon- it was powered by celestial energy, not material objects. When Minho crushed the light in his

hands, he shaped the particles into cartridges, whispered, "*Chamomenta*," for healing properties, and loaded it into the chamber before he handed it off to Chan.

Chan turned around to properly address the back. "Who should I trust to shoot?"

Jisung, fulfilled with the work he'd already done, noped out. Hyunjin seemed content with his duty of filming. Seungmin had made himself busy enough with making a shield of hoodies from the acid. The only one who seemed remotely interested was Jeongin, who already had his hands out grinning and eager.

Wisely so, Changbin didn't want to subject them all to that. "Fuck it, I'll go."

Chan handed it off to him butt first. "Careful of the knockback."

"I'll put my trust in the seatbelts." Switching spots with Felix, he clicked off the safety, unlocked the door, and prepared to open. "Ready when you are."

"Let them get closer- you've got a better chance of hitting one short range."

"Don't throw away your shot," Felix added.

To say they let the hellhounds catch up to them would have been a bit of a misinterpretation- with or without the many amplifier glyphs Minho had stuck to the car, those mutts were made to track down runaway souls, them included. When Jeongin could see their growling hackles in the back window, he broke. "Fuck it- Changbin, *now!*"

No further encouragement needed, the demon kicked open the door, leaned out and fired.

Not without measured guidance, of course- ether bullets were nothing to waste. But with a high-speed chase such as this, there wasn't much time to kill with tracking, not when your target was also the very thing you were trying to evade. The guy couldn't have missed more than two shots even with the thresh of the wind on his back. With every hellhound felled, another came along to take its place, catching a bullet in its open mouth, a pill that put them to sleep.

"Goodbye, my brethren," Jeongin whispered as the last hellhound slumped in the dirt, succumbing to slumber. "Rest well and rise again."

The chimera, on the other hand, was more than a little pissed that his cavalry had been taken out. After three bullets - one in the jaw, two in its hide - still hadn't put him down, Jisung had taken to joining SeungIn under their hoodie fort.

"Get the snake head!" Seungmin yelled. "It's the only part with any aim!"

"Meaning it has the strongest braincell," Hyunjin concluded thoughtfully.

"Just give me a minute!" Changbin squinted through the scope, brows furrowed deep in concentration. "Steady..." The moment the goat head reared back, inner column of his throat glowing torchlight orange, he fired off their last bullet at the snake.

The bullet struck the smallest part of the whole operation, but the chimera howled in pain. In slow motion, his legs buckled, tail fell limp, and his whole massive body slumped to the ground, pushing up a cloud of red.

"Binnie, get in!" Hyunjin yelled- the goat had fired off one last pesky fireball before going out, and it was hurtling right for his head.

Before anyone could properly scream again- hell, before Changbin himself even looked up -Felix lurched forward, grabbed the handle in one hand and the front of his shirt in the other, and pulled both back inside. Which naturally ended up with a very surprised Changbin pinned against the door.

Felix, obviously not having thought up to this outcome, swallowed dry and hard. "Hey."

Changbin, rifle slipping from his fingers and vocabulary depleted of anything else, breathed out, "Hi."

"Can I fall out of the car now?" Hyunjin asked Chan dryly.

"No."

Jisung, Seungmin, and Jeongin unearthed themselves from under the hoodies, checking their window for any perforations they'd missed. "Motherfucker," Jeongin groaned. "Minho?"

"What is it," Minho asked loudly, the astra he'd taken from Changbin holding his attention.

"I spy with my little eye a bitch on a tank in a suit that's too good for him and the entourage that Death takes with him to the apocalypse."

Minho winced so hard he almost pulled the trigger through Chan's shoulder. "Tell me it isn't."

For the djinn's sake, Jeongin double checked. "It's him."

"Son of a *shit*."

Each vehicle was painted with giant crimson calligraphy of the sigil of Lucifer. Rolling ominously towards them were six military-grade armored trucks, black as a night that had never seen the moon before, loaded window to window with gunners poking their heads out. And, of course, believing strongly in the number seven, leading

them into battle was full-fledged army tank, Kai standing on a hatch-turned-crow's nest barking out orders.

"Anyone good on taking the astra to see if they can get a headshot?" Hyunjin asked.

"Fuck no." Changbin, who'd successfully transferred back into his regular seat, leaned over between the driver and passenger's seats. "Can we go any faster?"

"We can sure try," Chan replied, revving the engine, changing course onto sloping hills under the shadows.

Valiant as the effort had been, the shadows did little to give them cover from the trucks that fanned out on either side, three on the left, three on the right. Though the fog of canyon rust cloaked their tracks and rear, it still didn't stop Kai from yelling, "Fire at will!"

"Everybody down!" Minho shouted.

The bullets pattered down like rainfall- pure silver, bursting like landmines in the ground with every shot that was missed. Each after-explosion rang out like graceless, deafening fireworks; every time one pinged just a little closer, someone flinched just an inch farther from the window.

"It's like a gas station car wash but *fucking bullshit*," Jeongin screeched with his hands clapped over his ears.

Chan drove through empty ravines, beside long dead trees, under towering bluffs, anything that would give them a second away from the ceaseless onslaught. It was only thanks to the protection barriers set up around the car that it wasn't plugged with holes in the first minute, but even some of the strongest enchantments left weak spots in the windows, on the roof; Kai had some very unfairly good snipers on his side.

"Ah-" Seungmin bit down the cry, face scrunched into a grimace as he slapped a hand over the side of his neck. "*Shit. Fucking silver.*"

"Did one get you?" asked Hyunjin worriedly.

"Just a graze, don't worry, I'm fine."

Minho shut the glove compartment, tossed the siren the first aid kit over his shoulder. "If it goes untreated, even the smallest touch will fester." Tentatively, Seungmin took his hand away to let Hyunjin treat him; the tiny scar was already burning into his flesh. "I'm *really* getting tired of this."

And somehow, that wasn't even the worst part. While they were getting shot up by the Queen of England's smelted kitchenware, Kai, like the screaming madman he was, had deigned to putting in his own commentary.

"Stings, doesn't it?" Kai's voice blared through the megaphone, which had obviously- and regrettably -been amplified. "Silver melted down with adamantine- your little werepup must be having a hell of a time. Then again, I only keep the best for you, Minho."

"Who the fuck does he think he *is*?" Felix hissed.

"Someone who can talk like that and not get celestially castrated," Changbin replied, head ducked from another shot.

But the celestial in question wasn't making a move. Minho kept his eyes on the road, scoping out possible escape routes, focusing on the mission at hand to block out the warlock's incessant shouting. Yet, as much as he wanted to pretend, to manifest hard enough and make it true, every word stuck in his skin like a shard of glass, each one embedding deeper and deeper. Behind him, it was all the others could do not to stare at the terse hold of his frame, like a slackening marionette.

"You can run, but you can never hide," Kai prattled on. "You never could keep yourself from me- one way or another I always found you. We are *connected*, you and I. Surely you can't deny *that* any longer."

"Sorry, *why* are we listening to this?" Seungmin asked.

"Three options: either shoot the astra, rip out our eardrums, or blast the Warblers' album from Glee," Jeongin proposed. "All are starting to sound equally tempting, so someone better come up with a better idea."

If their lack of a response was any kind of hint, Kai wasn't taking it. It was quite possible some of the gunners had stopped shooting just so his tangent could come across even louder.

"It'll never matter how many years you spend away from me. You *know* it's true. Lamp or no lamp, tattoo or no tattoo, the knowledge will never be erased. Come back to me, to my army, and I'll reteach it to you all over again. Besides," Kai's devious grin echoed sickeningly through the rearview window as he added: "I always liked the look of you in chains."

A wayward shot hit a shrub. There wasn't a goddamn word any of them could say to that. Minho's face reddened, and he squeezed his eyes shut, hunched a little more into himself. One hand coiled around his wrist like it was trying to squeeze out a pulse.

"Fuck it," Jisung decided finally. "I say we kill him. Show of hands- anyone else down to commit murder?" Everyone except Minho and Chan raised their hands. "Kill someone, kill someone, kill someone, and the vote is *unanimous*. Chan, turn this bad boy around, we've got a body to add to our kill count." Silence. "Chan?"

Throughout the entirety of the bullet barrage, the vampire had held his tongue, kept his focus on getting his coven to safety. But now, anyone could see it: the look in his eyes, like seconds off a ticking bomb straight ahead, the grip of his knuckles on the steering wheel,

clenched white to purple to red, same shade as the blood he wanted to spill. The set of his jaw, sharp and immovable, like a sword shoved through stone. Whatever line he had drawn, Kai had officially crossed it.

"Chan," Minho whispered, moving to reach out for him. "Chan, are you alright?"

Chan's hold relaxed only slightly on the wheel. "Take my seat."

"What- what're you-"

He kicked open the driver's door, jumped out, and disappeared.

The backseat: instant yelling pandemonium. Most notably Hyunjin, who'd gotten it on film.

"*Fucking-*" Minho jumped into the driver's seat, swerved the car back on its path. "*Damn it, Chan!*"

"Okay, you got that, right?" Felix pointed to Hyunjin, who nodded shakily. "We *all* saw that, right?"

"Shadow-travel out of a moving vehicle," Seungmin contemplated. "I don't think he's ever done that before."

"Where the hell *is* he?" snapped Minho. "I need to drag him back and kill him myself."

"He's on the tank," said Changbin, staring out the window, whole face pale as paper.

"On the- what do you mean he's 'on the tank?'"

"I mean he's *on* Kai's *tank*! He's climbing it!"

And, as the rest of the coven could see as they pressed their faces to the glass, he was: a tiny, faraway spider of a man clinging to the

massive hull, just below the dark outline of the main gun, latching a superhuman hand onto the edge of the turret.

Minho knocked the back of his head hard on the headrest. Hyunjin filmed out the window, zooming in on their leader.

Kai's ego hadn't blindsided him enough as not to notice the driver door fly open, as well as who had leaped out of it. "Cease fire!" he demanded. "Train your weapons on anything with a shadow!"

Unfortunately for the warlock, that was a bit too broad of a subject; his confused gunners quite literally trained their guns on everything with a shadow- everything but their own tank, which Chan was quickly scaling up.

"What's he even going to *do*?" murmured Jeongin.

"What the whole lot of us have been wanting to do since day one," replied Hyunjin, the grin on his face splitting wide as Chan hauled himself up on top of the turret. "Put that motherfucker's jaw sideways."

It was only a joke, but it was enough to get Minho drag his eyes from the road and onto the rearview mirror, where he could catch a tinted glimpse of Chan vaulting over the bars of the crow's nest, yanking an astounded Kai in by the wrist, and slamming his fist into the side of his face so forcefully no magic would ever be able to correct its crooked angle.

The whole SUV erupted with a war cry of raucous encouragement, Minho unable to keep himself from craning out the window to get a better view.

"Knock his lights out, Chan!" cheered Jisung.

By the time the gunners realized where the real menace was, Kai was already slumped against the railing with a black eye and busted lip, pathetically trying to pull himself up again while Chan slipped

neatly into the cockpit, shutting the hatch over him. One could almost see the cartoon *booms* and *pows* resonating from inside, hear the concerned shouts of the shocked gunners on the left as the tank of their leader veered heavily off in their direction, bracketed all three cars against a cliffside, and smashed into them like a wrecking ball. The trio of explosions resembled collapsing stars, curling in around the tank, threatening to swallow it whole.

"Wait-" Felix started.

"Did he get out?" asked Jeongin. In all the havoc wreaked, they couldn't see if a separate hatch had opened, if their boy had made it out alive.

A knock on the window startled Felix so badly he almost fell out of his seat.

"Would it be any trouble to let me in?" said who could only, unmistakably be Chan.

The angel reached over the vacated passenger door and tugged it open, allowing Chan to slip smilingly back inside.

Minho had remembered to be angry. "What the hell was that?"

"I know you said you wanted to do the thing yourself, but I really needed to blow off some steam- those gunners weren't part of the plan, but I figured y'know. Oh!" He dug through his pocket, produced a black diamond ring. "And I got this." *Ooh's* and *ahh's* and *holy fucking shit, he got it's* from the whole gang. Minho watched the vampire laugh it off. "I didn't know if it would work, but with the bet going, and the fact that Kai hasn't smited us yet, I thought it'd be-"

Minho seized the collar of his polo with both hands and hauled Chan into a furious kiss, cutting him off. It was the kind that sank in like slow music, that stole breath, that tugged hard and deep and said things that words didn't; the sparks running down Chan's spine were practically tangible, real as a skipping star.

Minho pulled away with a growl. “*You*,” he said into Chan’s awestruck eyes. “I love you. Don’t *ever* doubt that, you hear me?”

Chan was either going to faint on the spot or pull out the ring in his other pocket right there. “Never,” he breathed woozily, for there was nothing else to say.

“Hey. Hi.” Jisung butted in between them, grinning like a comic book character, having caught the ring Chan had dropped. “That was great. We’re all gonna die now.”

Minho and Chan only had time to look away from each other’s faces and at the literal wall of fire simple feet away from their car before Minho slammed his foot on the brakes, lurching them to an abrupt stop. “*Shit.*”

"A beauty, I know," Kai's raggedy voice boasted; apparently, it had slipped Chan's mind to dismantle the megaphone too. The tank was slowly swiveling back into motion, the warlock manning it leaning weightily on the bars of the nest for support. "A macro of a spell, used to keep any of my racers from cheating. So glad *someone* decided to put it to good use."

"Honestly, I am so cool with burning to death right now," Hyunjin conceded. "Send me down to Purgatory medium rare."

"We're at an impasse here," Kai continued. "The end of the line." With the towering canyon cliffs all around, the three remaining trucks creeping behind withering shrubs like giant hungry vultures, the flames blazing ahead, it wasn't anything less than true. "We're all tired of the fighting, and there's nowhere left to run. But we both know it doesn't have to be like this."

"Oh, no," Seungmin started, voice already steeping in dread. "Please don't tell me he's actually going to say it."

"All of this is because of one runaway treasure who wanted to try for a spark of rebellion, let it carry him all the way around the world, and

I think we know who it is." The accusation laid to rest on the sun-scorched mesa dirt. "Minho, darling."

Jeongin gagged heartily into his hand.

"The chase has ended. The battle is over. I have searched for you long enough- you've had your adventure. Let us put an end to all this theatricality." To add in a little extra flair, Kai extended his hand, like God giving life to Adam. "Come home with me, and I will accept you. Your friends will go unharmed. All of this will be water under the bridge, forgiven and forgotten."

"I don't think I've ever smelled such a powerful scent of bullshit," Felix ruminated.

"I cannot promise it will be the same as you remembered, but it will be stronger. You will have a dominion, more power than you could ever imagine. Beneath your scar, the sigil of Lucifer still remains intact, burned into you. He will never rid you of his spirit, just as I have never rid you of mine." And then Kai's voice darkened, a strip of cloud drifting over the sun. "You know what I can do. What I am capable of. Return to your place, and there will be no reason for any further violence."

Unluckily for Kai, there already was; he'd decided that the night he trapped Minho in his service all the way back in 1930. One empty promise wasn't doing anything to quiet the contempt brewing in the SUV below.

"No, no, fuck no," Changbin announced, unbuckling his seatbelt and cracking his knuckles. "We're getting out. We're fucking this up."

"Cool. And what plan do you have that deals with the literal dozens of machine guns trained on our heads?" Seungmin challenged.

"Chan, do you think you could travel us out to one of the cars?" asked Jeongin.

"I don't know if I've got it in me to get us all outside," murmured the vampire doubtfully.

"Well, we've gotta figure out *something!*" said Hyunjin. "There's way we're just gonna let Minho-"

Click.

All heads snapped towards the passenger seat, where Minho was letting his seatbelt strap slink away across his torso.

"Minho," said Felix carefully. "What are you doing?"

Minho looked around at their alert, quizzical expression. "Getting out," he replied simply. "Doing what needs to be done."

It took a minute to hit. The moment they realized what he meant, it burst out in an eye-widening, frightened, furious, "*No.*"

"Guys, it's o-"

"No!" Hyunjin dropped his phone, grabbed his arm to keep him inside. "You can't give up now." His lower lip trembled. "We're not gonna let you leave!"

"That's not what I'm doing." Minho's tone was balanced, even, the scales of logic and reasoning leveled out. "I'm facing him, putting an end to this for all of us."

"Babe, please," Chan begged, voice quavering on fragile, cracking ice. "We can make a plan, find another way. You don't have to do it like this."

"This is the only way I can do this." Minho touched a thumb to his cheekbone, smiled through his nerves. "I know what I'm doing." Then, to the others. "You just have to trust me on this, okay?"

The demand was compassionate, genial, almost benign: *let me go*. Right there on the table, the one time he requested both a start and

finish to his fight, no backup to make the job easier.

"Have we come to a decision?" Kai asked, as if he'd given them a choice.

If there was one wish they could grant, it could very well be that.

Hesitantly, Hyunjin released his grip, and Chan let Minho retract his hand. The djinn took his time sliding out of his seat, opening the door. When he swept a glance across the layout, lingered just a moment longer on Chan, his eyes glittered over a smirk quirked at the corner of his mouth, the way it did when he'd found a winning hand in his UNO deck. "Be back before you know it."

He walked out like an old Western rogue strutting into the final showdown, red kimono whipping in the wind, black boots trampling red soil, the sun like a spotlight tracking his steps. Minho stopped right under its center, framed by the three black cars on every side, camera scopes taking the forms of gun barrels. Kai stared him down from atop the tank, the villain of the hour, blood dripping from his nose, staining the priceless fabric of his suit and the skin of his tattoo.

Minho tilted his head over his shoulder so that his eyes met Chan's, just barely, in the rearview mirror. All he spared was a nod.

That was all the vampire needed to take an extra three protection glyphs from the glove compartment, slap them on the dash, and blaze through the firewall.

The car took off on what little gas it had left, whirling around and Tokyo drifting around the bluff of a canyon that would have smashed its hood into a crushed steel pancake. Once they were safely on the sidelines, Chan jerked the throttle to a stop.

He turned towards backseat grinning like a fanboy. "You guys are gonna want to see this."

"Not so loyal to you now, are they?" Kai said, positively brimming with glee.

"Not as much as you," Minho responded, voice dripping enough sarcasm to flood the canyon. "Leave them out of this- it's me you want, not my coven."

"Indeed." Kai bent down to the open hatch of his tank. "Guards! Take the djinn to-"

"Wait." Minho held up a hand. "Before you throw me into a dimension, vore me, or whatever the fuck it is you do these days." He gestured out at the expanse around him. "Might I have the floor first?"

Kai bristled. Clearly, he hadn't missed all parts of Minho if he was still irked by his impertinence. "All right."

Minho curtly smiled his thanks. "Still a gentleman, as always," he simpered. "Never were anything less, on the surface. All the years I stuck by your side, watched you suck up to all those rich folks, steal the words off a script, tell them exactly what they wanted to hear. Get away with every word. Every time you walked back into Amnesia, you smiled, because you knew you had fooled them. Fooled all of us again, into believing that there was even a sliver of heart inside of you." Minho paused to think, to contemplate his next piece. "You always said you'd chosen the sigil of Lucifer as your brand because he was your patron." Looking Kai full-on, he said: "Maybe it was simply two sides of the same coin."

Kai's temper flared. "Are you calling me-"

"Well, then again, that'd mean you were once an angel, and *that* just couldn't be true. Although, according to Felix, there are some twisted fuckers up there who haven't gotten kicked out." A scoff that flourished into a laugh. "Is that how you've done it for so long? Play your cards to the right crowd, claim a stolen being as a part of your own vulgar nation, flaunt around all the power you've scrounged up

and pretend it all doesn't come from come a few books, enchantments, and a ring?" Instinctively, Kai reached to twist his ring finger and froze, finding it bare. The dismay on his face unfolded clear as day. "Without all that, you're nothing. Without *me*, you're nothing. Not the other way around."

"You will be silent at *once*."

"And what'll you do? Hex me? Put me back in chains? Not anymore, bucko. I've got the power of the sun and stars on my side, and even they see how badly you've fucked up. You wanna know how?" Kai's scowl deepened. "You let us walk right in, thinking you already had our blueprints figured out. You thought you could move us around like the pieces on a board, predict what we would do. That we were all so scared we wouldn't think outside the box. I guess I don't blame you- that's just what power does when no one takes it away from you. I would know." With every piece he threw at him, Minhó got bolder. "But the difference between me and you is that I wised up. I learned that it wasn't everything- that I *didn't* have to take it from beings who already had nothing."

"Tell me we're not doing this *again*-"

"Did I say I was *done*?" For the first time in his too-long life, Kai shut his mouth. "Did you really think I'd come back here the same boneless, broken-down coward I was before? That I didn't have a few words stored up from the years you treated me like your golden goose, stuffing yourself on the profits?" A few of the gunners had lowered their rifles to watch him go off. "It didn't matter how well you treated us- me, Momo, everyone. We were prisoners just as much as those third class saps, and you never imagined the day they would finally revolt. Why do you think Huening Kai tried to cut your throat all those years ago?" His name out Minhó's mouth narrowed Kai's eyes. "He wasn't going to stand for you treating him like a pet, even if it would have been easier. He wasn't afraid of you- he was braver than all of us, and you made him pay for it with his life. I might not have been strong enough to say this to you then, but I am now." Minhó leveled his gaze with Kai's; even with their difference in

stature, they were now on the same ground. "You're a shit warlock, Kai. And a worse fucking salesman. Which is why I'm going to have to tell you no."

Kai looked at him like he'd sent his jaw another forty-five degrees to the left. "'No?'"

"I know, been a while since you've heard it. No, I'm not going back to you for another hundred years on your shithole ship in exchange for peace. I've found the occasional war to be much more fulfilling."

Kai, all false chivalry and magical bravado gone, jutted out his crooked chin. "Very well." Without taking his eyes off Minhø, he yelled to the gunners: "Fire at will!"

"No!" The backseat shouted.

Minho closed his eyes as the bullets came, shrouding him in a consuming cloud of reddened dirt, and for a moment the air was filled with fireworks again.

But as the dust settled, all that remained was the faintest scent of lavender smoke and sugar, Minhø with his arms crossed over his chest, fingers suspending the cage of pendulous bullets around him, *melting them* under the sunlight into orbs of golden radiance.

Softly, he laughed. "I have been waiting eighty-five years to feel this good," Minhø murmured, and thrust his arms out, sending the burning bullets back to their senders.

Faster than the snipers could scream, the orbs zipped through their windows and doors and burst into brilliant flashes, like marigold petals. Minhø threw his head back and laughed out loud, harder than he had in years, and rocketed up into the sky, the sleeves of his kimono like wings. Hyunjin hung halfway out the window trying to follow his ascent with his phone.

Up in front of the sun, every inch of Minho was incandescent, a maestro before his orchestra, conducting the instruments with nothing but his bare hands. Its power surged through him, the veins of his skin glowing white and yellow and blinding gold, the purest of ether. He charged off at the cars as if shot from a ballista, aura shining like his whole body had been doused in solar energy. He was moving at the speed of light, sound, and life, a comet in the flesh weaving a burning web of white-hot karma through every vehicle, person, and gun that had caused him trouble that day.

"It's like the Smash Ball but real life," Jisung marveled.

"He didn't even move this fast when I accidentally spilled grape juice on Doongie," Jeongin noted.

"But you still got your ass kicked, didn't you?" pointed out Hyunjin.

The trucks wholly decimated, the tank filled with more holes than a decent block of Swiss cheese, Minho dropped into the world's most flawless three-point landing, a shimmering supernova. His eyes locked on Kai as he rose leisurely to his feet, drinking in the look in his eyes that truly took in Minho for the first time, the fear he was causing him- all the pain Kai had inflicted on him and then some, given back tenfold.

Hands out in front of him, Minho gripped thin air like he was about to throw open the stage curtains and *pulled*- tore a rift in the sky itself.

"Holy *shit*-"

"Oh my God-"

"Wait, *what*-"

The djinn stretched it out more, gritted his teeth, ground his heels into the dirt and standing his ground as the wind picked up around him, the sun itself flickered, sucking shrubs and debris and whole trucks and bodies into the black hole of his making. Inside, they all

simply vanished, usurped by the pitch black everything, devoid of clouds and stars and anything that would inspire a sliver of hope.

"Miracle," Chan whispered, spellbound and infatuated as the abyss in the sky ripped open wide.

As the tank elevated off the ground, Kai lunged out of the crow's nest, onto the battered turret, clinging onto the barrel of the main gun as the gravity below him ceased to exist, as he was pulled farther and farther into the void. The last thing he would see on the world he knew was the gemstone he'd let slip through his fingers, purple and red and black as a cataclysm, showing Kai just as much mercy as he'd shown him aboard the Amnesia.

Clothes whipping around his body, threatening to lift Minho off his feet too, he dropped his hands, closing the rift- Kai, sigil, and every poor bastard who'd followed it.

The winds roared in response, buffeting against his face and pushing back against the face of the earth, rustling trees and boulders, setting the sun back to its normal state of brightness. In the sky, there was only cerulean blue; not a trace of black to be seen.

Next to the SUV, Twice's BMW had pulled in, white paint job studded with flecks of soil. As both covens slid out of their cars, everyone touched ground with cautious deliberation; who knew if it would decide to crumble under their feet?

Minho, seeing no seam that could be undone, nodded his approval. Dusted off his clothes and raked his hair back, looking out towards his friends. "Everyone okay?"

A bubble of hysteria popped, bringing gales of delirious laughter with it. The laughter turned genuine as the covens broke off into a run for him, kicking up dirt and bullet shells and any fear that they wouldn't be able to succeed, Chan making damn sure he reached him first.

BLACK MIRROR - ONEUS

*Master of Puppets - Liliac

*Another One Bites the Dust - Queen

*Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This) - Eurythmics

*Like a G6 - Far East Movement

Interlude - Teenage Dream

Chapter 17: Interlude - Teenage Dream

And how was that for a victory?!

To celebrate, we're going back in time with another little bit of MinChan to send you on your way.

You make me

Feel like I'm living a teenage dream

The way you turn me on, I can't sleep

Let's run away and don't ever look back, don't ever look back...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eldritch, Oregon - 3 years ago

"Chan."

"Mmmmh."

"*Chan.*" Another sleepy groan. "Wake up, you sloth."

"I like being sloth."

"You didn't forget what day it is, did you?"

Chan rolled over. "Of course I didn't forget." His eyes blinked open, fully registering the sight before him. "Oh, you *asshole*."

Minho grinned, setting the tray of crepes, berries, and drink assortments on the bed. "Happy seventy-second anniversary."

Seventy two years, and it still hit the same.

"What's this about?" Chan asked as he pushed himself up into a sit. "I'm the one who makes us breakfast."

"Thought it'd be funny if I woke up early enough to beat you to the punch. Turns out I had to- did you know crepe batter has to sit for two hours before you can use it? Really wears on the patience. But it did give me time to buy more Nutella at the store- I'm pretty sure Felix is eating it out of the jar at this point."

Chan laughed. "Thank you, Min."

"You're welcome." Minho watched him peer into the glasses and mugs at all the choices. "I know you say you're fine with your whole 'one coffee black as your soul' thing, but I thought you could use a little variety this year."

"I hope this isn't our entire fridge."

"There were some things I had to buy at the store," Minho admitted. "But I considered them necessities."

"So you made hot chocolate-"

"- from the Aztec recipe we got from Guatemala."

"*And* brushed suede-"

"Pinterest was a very helpful tool."

"*And* matcha?"

"Jamie said it was on the house with the moon milk."

"... Is that-?"

"Yeah, I wanted to see the look on your face when you saw it. Not too much like last time, though."

The smile on Chan's face spread bright and crooked as the stars above their bed. "You really did go all out for me."

Minho's own mouth lifted to mimic the gesture as he sat on the edge of the mattress, brushed with morning mist. "Well, I'm allowed to, aren't I?"

"I swear, if it weren't for these occasions, I'd forget why you stick around me all the time."

"You little shit. Who else is going to make sure I'm kept in comfort for the rest of eternity?"

"A lot can happen in eternity."

"You mean like us?"

"Yeah." Even though they hadn't intended to find each other in the first place. "Like us."

Even as they heard it out loud, it didn't seem to have an effect. Nothing did- not eras, not decades, not any mortal war. Time had never been able to touch them.

"So," Chan continued, "the plan for today? Did we make all the reservations?"

"All down to the dot- Yugyeom and Bambam will be able to make it, I checked. Can we not focus on that for a minute?"

"Alright, alright." Beat. Approximately one unexact moment where Chan didn't focus on that. "What time is it?"

"Nine thirty."

"You let me sleep in *that* long?"

"Please, if I leave you in charge of your sleep schedule, you don't sleep at all. Besides, I like waking up before you- your hair in the mornings is truly a wonder to behold."

"You are impossible."

"And you are beautiful." Minho pressed him back against the pillows with an unhurried hand, watched Chan watch him. The cuff of his golden manacle poked out from underneath the cuff of his sweater. "Come on. Outside can wait for a while."

Chan's eyes flicked down to his lips, smiling at the expression he found on them. "How long do we have?"

"Does that matter?" As Minho closed in, Chan flicked the speck of powdered sugar out of his hair. "As long as we want."

"Works for me." The tray bumbled as they moved. "That's gonna tip over."

"It's fine, I'll get it, I'm magic."

"I know *that*." Chan reeled Minho in by the waist, and they collapsed laughing on the lavender bedspread.

They made out lazily for hours or days, limbs clothed in soft morning sweats tangled up in each other, spreading sweet kisses of chocolate syrup and strawberries and matcha everywhere. Occasionally breaks were taken to watch a remastered version of Tony and Maria encounter one another shyly under the bleachers on Chan's laptop, bask in the luxury of wasting away a whole afternoon just the two of them.

Hours later, they finally left room 17 at late twelve, decked out for a night on the town.

"Even with my best efforts, I still couldn't make crepes better than the ones at Brenda's," sighed Minho. "The one time San Francisco bests

Eldritch.”

Chan eyed the still-flushed bite mark hidden by the lapel of Minho’s gray Burberry steel blazer and vintage Queen t-shirt washed with Jeongin’s laundry load so many times it had turned irreversibly magenta. “Tastes nice through you, though.”

”Oh, please.” Then, out of sheer curiosity: “Can you actually tell what I’ve eaten just by my blood?”

”Nope.” Their fingers tangled together. “It’s just you.”

”*Cheesy*,” Minho teased, nuzzling a giggle out of him. And it was then that they noticed the courtyard was quiet. Too quiet.

”I say we got about five seconds to run,” whispered Chan.

But they barely got through three when the shrill buzz of a kazoo- no, a pitch pipe - rang out, and Changbin kicked open the door to the main room, boombox held above his head playing the brass octet bridge that made everyone else spring out of their hiding places: fox Jeongin from under the coffee table, HyunLix from behind the couch, Jisung from where he’d been strapped to the ceiling of the catwalk by morning glory vines, and even Seungmin making an appearance out the lobby exit.

”How the fuck did I know,” said Minho, with the fondest kind of annoyance a being could have.

”I didn’t even tell them to do it,” Chan mused as the bridge reached its climax, and all six too loud, too eager voices yelled:

*”I love you, baby!**”

”And if it's quite alright, I need you baby, to warm the lonely night,”

”I love you, baby, trust in me when I say,”

The couple of the hour descended the stairs to a near overwhelming welcome of a song circle, every sound in the courtyard turning into, *"I need you, baby, don't let me down, I pray, oh, pretty baby,"*

"Now that I've found you, stay,"

"And let me love you, baby, let me love you~"

The finale came with jazz hands; those alone deserved the applause Minho and Chan gave them. "Thank you, boys," Minho managed through the smile he couldn't force away. "We couldn't have asked for a better welcome and send-off."

"We've only been practicing that routine for a week," said Hyunjin, faux-modest as he dropped the hands. "That's how long it took Changbin to get his cue."

"Hey, I did fine in rehearsals!" Changbin argued.

"Regardless of any mistakes," Felix swooped in, "we hope our gift to you came together like we'd hoped."

"Couldn't have been better," Chan promised. "Now, we're going to be away for little while. Can we trust you lot not to trash the place while we're gone?"

"What do you think we are, five?" challenged Seungmin. "We don't need a babysitter."

"You, maybe," Jisung snickered. A quickly transformed werewolf arm socked him hard in the shoulder.

"Oh, don't worry about us- go off, have fun!" Jeongin turned them around, steered them on their way. "Not too much fun, of course."

Minho rolled his eyes. "Goodbye, guys."

"Bye!"

The entrance to Levanter shut, and the pair released an exhale of shared relief. "That wasn't too much of a holdup," Minho acknowledged.

"I love them, but sometimes eight's a crowd." Chan offered him a chivalrous hand. "Shall we?"

Minho drank in the sight of him: black low-buttoned dress shirt, blood garnet pendulum gift from Momo resting below the hollow of his pale throat, princely curls dark and wavy. "We shall."

If you'd lived in a small town like Eldritch for as long as Chan and Minho had, you got to know a lot of people, and a lot of people got to know you. Meaning every person they passed on the street found a new way to congratulate them on their anniversary.

"I think it's sweet," Chan commented. "So many people we meet remember us well enough to know the day we got together."

"Except for fucking Lana," groused Minho. "Takes my order every Tuesday at the same cafe and can't even bother to know who I've been in a relationship since the 40's. Seriously, who else has a usual of chai, espresso, *and* vanilla latte in the same cup?"

"Nobody does it like you, love."

"Fucking right."

Their first destination was at Reed Lake, cutting a border behind the downtown area and separating it from the woodland outskirts. A boardwalk bridge, dappled in whatever golden half-sunset light would touch it beyond the trees, lead to an old white steamboat, which had long been abandoned by its sailors. But the citizens of Eldritch were nothing if not creative- with some tasteful remodeling, hefty budgets, and universally swoonworthy ideas, it was able to be revamped into one of the most exclusive fine dining spots in Portland- for those who knew about it, anyway.

The waistcoated hostess was already waiting for them behind the podium when they arrived. Heejin grinned, her own sharp fangs apparent. "Right on time, gentlemen."

"Some tradition can't afford to be broken," replied Chan. She knew, of course- they'd been coming for the last thirty-two years since it opened.

"I suppose we don't have to say party of two anymore?" said Minho.

"Never did." Heejin slithered out from behind the podium; instead of legs, her torso was carried upon a serpents tail of glimmering iridescent scales- rainbows in every turn. "Follow me to your seats."

Butterfly was run by four members of local coven LOONA- Heejin, Hyunjin, Haseul, and Gaahei, otherwise known as LOONA 1/3. It was their combined genius that made the place so notorious: Heejin and Hyunjin, the head cook, had came up with the refined take on the French-Asian fusion menu for the dishes, and Haseul and Gaahei drew from their lives as naiads to vision-board the Grecian modifications. Chiseled ionic pillars held up the levels, open windows were draped with billowy drawn curtains of fuchsia tulle, velvet carpets colored a lush wine purple, meals delivered to chattering patrons on emerald green tablecloths by invisible wind spirits, there and gone as quickly as they'd come, only able to be detected by the scent of mild cloves and sharp tarragon.

"Here we are," Heejin announced at the center third floor, leading them to the small circular table meant only for two close to the veranda. "Best seats in the house."

"You know," Chan started. "You don't always have to give this spot to us-"

"- *but* we're thankful that you do," Minho cut in for him, smiling brightly as if Chan hadn't spoken at all.

"Anything for our favorite customers," said Heejin easily. "Although I guess I should ask: do you guys still have the—"

"*Couple's discount*," MinChan answered in unison, Chan pulling said coupon out of his wallet.

"*Damn* it. Are we ever going to catch you off guard?"

"We come here the same day, same time, for the same exact reason every year." Minho winked. "We'll let you dream."

Heejin rolled her eyes. "Happy anniversary, shitheads." She revolves around and glided on her way. "Enjoy the courtesy while it lasts!"

"Shitheads," mused Minho. "That one's new."

"And the courtesy," chimed in Chan.

"So much courtesy."

From the stretch they could see, it looked like the whole world was green: a glittering lake under a blissful twilight sky, the curtains pulling back to unveil a panorama of green trees spreading out over rolling grassy hills, When Heejin called their spot the best seats in the house, it wasn't just an expression.

They pulled out their chairs, moved aside the complementary ice bucket of champagne to look each other in the eye beyond the flickering candlelight.

"So," said Chan. "Can we agree that just this once, tradition is nice?"

"Just this once," Minho conceded, snatching up their glasses with one hand and the champagne bottle in the other. "I mean, there's the food."

"Mm, can't relate."

"And the dependable hospitality."

"Five stars every time."

"And the view, well." Beyond the breathtaking sky, wind brushed Chan's soft curls, his chin tucked into his hand, his archaic smile outlined in a pale bronze, like the Tuscan sun back in '68. "You can't beat it."

"Hmm." The corners of Chan's mouth tilted up more. "Nice try."

Minho shot him a look as he handed him his glass. "It's kinda funny, when you think about it."

"What is?"

"How long we've been together. Longer than I was ever on my own- longer than you'd been alive." He swirled the drink in its glass. "I dunno. Just moments like this that make me remember."

All the chatter around them melded in with the soft Muzak backdrop. "Guess you never really know how long eternity is until you think about it."

"I hope you don't think I would ever change it for anything. Seriously- even Soonie, Doongie, and Dori don't go inside the lamp anymore. All the fashion trends of this century, I'd hate to see what it looks like now."

Even though they both knew: heavenly, beautiful, empty. The flash of gold Minho tried to hide under the cuffs of every sweater, jacket, and blazer reminded them every time.

Chan hesitated, but forced out the words anyway. "I could still try to--"

"Chan, please. Not today, not now. We don't have to worry about that."

"But it's been years, Minho- longer than seventy-two. I haven't fulfilled my promise to you."

"A promise I didn't ask you to make," Minho reminded him. "We haven't been distracted- we've been living our lives. We deserve that, both of us."

"But don't you think about it?" Chan's voice drooped. "If you were really free?"

"Of course I do." Minho couldn't lie. "But you've never made me feel like I'm not. Isn't that the point?"

"Of our arrangement," Chan intoned, allowing a soft smile. "I guess so." The candles seemed to shudder as he said, "You've managed to make my wishes come true without any magic."

Minho scoffed. "Now you're just being cheesy again."

"I am not! Come on, you know that. I've told you." Chan persisted until his face split into a begrudging smile. "I could never want more than just this."

If that truly was the case, Minho decided he couldn't argue with that. "What should we toast to this time?"

"I dunno, depends if we want to be serious or corny. Everlasting love?"

"You could either be talking about the Elephant Love Medley or the Glee episode, and neither of those give good vibes at the moment. To the Gilmore Girl's aesthetic?"

"Ooh, that's a good one." Glasses were halfway raised when-

"I just can't stop hating Rory."

"Me fucking neither. *Shit.*"

"To alcohol?"

"Greek architecture?"

"Low-buttoned shirts."

"Burberry blazers."

"Dimples."

"Eye smile."

"Early mornings."

"Late nights."

"There's too *many*," Minho moaned. "How do we just pick one every time?"

"By sticking with the basics." Chan raised his glass. "To us."

Corny, classic, and always the truth. Minho raised his in return. "To us."

Blissful hours of champagne, turbot and morels, and what Haseul hinted to be the finely aged blood of King Henry VIII passed by like moments, and the couple left the check on their table pleasantly buzzed and still murmuring to one another.

At the hostess' podium, Haseul watched them go. "See you again next year," she called.

"Will do!" Chan promised over his shoulder on the walkway.

"Oh- and tell Sooyoung she's still got to take her Chucks out of the laundry!"

"Probably won't do that," Minho told her, but spared a commiserative wave goodbye.

Their second stop was another tradition: a downtown patisserie in the form of another LOONA run staple dubbed Paint The Town, this one taken up by the all faerie yyxy division. A petite butter yellow

structure with baby pink awning, the swirling cursive birch sign above the currant red door was made all the more welcome by the waning light of the sunset.

The shop bell jingled upon their entrance, past a window of pastel macaron towers, crème brûlée tartlets, eclairs and opera cakes. "Jiwoo, Chaewon!" Chan called out. "You know who it is!"

Out of the kitchen, Jiwoo herself threw open the doors with a strawberry and elderflower gâteau ready for the display case. Her whole face was taken up by a radiant grin. "Who else have we been keeping the store open for?"

"Hopefully not just for us," said Minho, accepting the side hug she doled out to him and Chan as she set the cake on the counter. "We can see that the tiramisu's all gone- that must mean a good day."

"That's only because the people love a best seller," said Chaewon, sweeping in from the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, a whisk dripping light green goop in one hand. "Question: are pistachios and mango a good combination? Trying something new."

Say *no*, mouthed Hyejoo, who'd entered behind her.

Chan, who'd seen and didn't want to crush her hopes completely, instead smiled like any encouraging friend would. "It's worth a shot."

Sooyoung whirled out of the kitchen with the delicate smells of everything sweet in the world. "Here to pick up your usual, I presume?"

"Not that it isn't a pleasure to see your face, Sooyoung," Minho told her. "I trust you've kept it in good condition."

"The finest." She set the pink box in her hands on the top of the counter, embellishing the dulcet yellow flower bow with a white carnation*. "Sure you don't want anything else to spice it up?"

"No up-spicing needed," Chan assured her. "It's perfect the way it is."

After a 50's era argument of whether the dessert should be chocolate or fruit based, they'd found PTT's melt-in-your-mouth (literally- they'd added alkahest just for that quality) chocolate raspberry torte to be the only suitable compromise for both their fickle taste buds- also making it one of the very few solid goods Chan could actually consume.

"Well, I'd hate to keep you two from your special night," said Jiwoo in a perfectly nudge-nudge-wink-wink fashion. "Make it a good one."

Minho passed Chan a wry smirk as he lifted the pink box off the counter. "We always do," he replied. "Thanks again!"

"And good luck with that new dish, Chaewon!" Chan called to her.

"If you remember, tell Hyejin to water the sunflowers!" Sooyoung added.

Minho shook his head as they walked out. "What is *with* those two?"

"Fuck if I'll ever know."

In every small town, there was a building that had been there since the beginning of time, too old to be repurposed, too aesthetic to be meant for anything but its purpose. To Eldritch, Belltower Books was that place- squat, sturdy brick and white domed ceilings lined with green-rusted copper upholding a token church bell, looking more like a chapel or town hall than a library. For the same couple centuries since its founding, sorceress Yubin- the one who'd taught Minho half the things in his sorcery room -had been running it, and more than willing to let the couple do with it as they pleased.

This time around, they were going down the simple route: Chan grabbing Minho's hand, using the shadow of the bell to travel up on the roof, sit on the edge with the torte in between them, dangle their

legs over the brick and take in the view they hadn't appreciated before.

"Beautiful," murmured Chan, Minho's head on his shoulder. "I don't think I'll ever get used to it."

"It's like every time we come up here, it just knows," said Minho, a bite of chocolate and raspberry already tucked in one cheek.

"Whatever's up there knows we're here, and makes the whole sky nice just for us. Like- like the world ships us or something."

Chan laughed into the clouds. "There's an idea."

"It'd make sense, wouldn't it? We've been around for this long."

"Are you sure you're not drunk?"

"Are *you* accusing me of being a lightweight?"

"Never." Hand over Minho's, the eternally worried knot in Chan's chest loosened. "The world, huh? All that land and ocean, I bet it's got to end somewhere."

"That's something we could find." Minho scooted closer, squishing the pink box, tangling Chan's fingers in his under the eyes of a pink lemonade, candied orange sky and a marvelous sunset. "Someday."

For anyone who wanted a kick start to their nightlife, Love Cherry Motion was the place to be. Sure, a karaoke bar might have been the obvious choice, but it was good for reuniting with long lost friends- especially if you knew the owners, aka LOONA's elusive Odd Eye circle, and they liked you enough to extend your drink tab just a little closer to infinity and never hold it against you.

Their friends were waiting for them by the entrance- not the others, but the ones that the 30's had brought around, forged in blood and bone, who hadn't been late for their anniversary since 1947.

"Bastards!" Minho yelled, running over to Momo with his arms outstretched.

"Right back at you, bitch," the jorogumo murmured, returning the hug.

Chan pulled Sana, Bambam, Brian, and Jamie into one big hug. "You all made it!"

"You know we got nothing better to do," said Brian, grinning hugely.

Sana reached up and poked his cheek. "And what better reason to come all the way back here than to celebrate the saps who stayed to put down roots?"

"The gayest roots of all," chimed Bambam helpfully.

"It's like you forget I *live* here." Jamie squirmed. "All I did was walk a couple of blocks-"

"- which we were more than happy to do," finished Yerin, standing a safe couple paces away.

"Where's my hug, Minho?" asked Yugyeom.

"Up your ass," the djinn replied, but released Momo to comply. "The only one you'll get- hopefully you didn't come out here just for that."

"I came along for the beer," supplied Jae. "I was told there would be beer."

"And karaoke," added Dahyun. "Telluride's pretty and all, but it's kinda starved."

"Well, we wouldn't invite all of you out with empty promises." Chan let the quartet in his arms go, waved them over to the door. "Right this way, party."

Inside, cupid beams a flashed amethyst geode color scheme, patrons shouted and drank, music blasted like a bass-boosted heartbeat. Minho met Yerim at the door with one of those best friend handshakes that ended with finger pistols firing off sparks. On their way to their reserved booth at the front of the stage, Chan yelled his greeting to Jinsoul along with their drink order. Manning the stage itself was Jungeun rocking the crowd on the catwalk with a special performance of This Hell.*

"This hell is better with you,"

"We're burning up together, baby, that makes two,"

When their order whisked by and dropped off at their table, Chan raised his Blue Moon bottle to the lights. "I don't think I have to waste any time telling you guys how thankful we are that all of you are here- clearly, you know that enough."

"To friends and lovers," started Minho, raising his Boulevardier.

"Fuck the others," intoned the party, tipping back their glasses to a chorus end of, *"this hell is better with you."*

Drinks started flowing, talking turned to shouts over loud music punctuated by half-hysterical laughter, and there was no better place for it than a karaoke bar in the corner of the gayest, most literally inhumane small town in the northwest.

It was impossible to tell how Yerim was the first one persuaded up onstage, but with one last sip of her Paloma and a kiss blown to Jamie, she ripped through a cover of Valerie*, every lyric vibrant and lighter than air. As reserved as she usually was, she managed got their whole table to sing, *"Since I've come home, well, my body's been a mess,"* delivering, *"And I miss your ginger hair, and the way you like to dress,"* right into Jamie's heart eyes.

"Oh, won't you come on over?"

"Stop making a fool out of me,"

"Why don't you come on over, Valerie?"

The whole table whooped and cheered, with her extremely proud girlfriend screeching her name. After that, it was a rip current of everyone taking the stage one at a time.

"This one's for you, Yeri!" Jamie yelled into the mic at the sylph, who was already covering her face as the intro to Love On Top* rolled in.

Needless to say, she was able to get her smiling by the key change, with enough boisterous energy and natural talent to get a rowdy chunk of bargoers screaming along to, *"Baby, it's you, you're the one I love, you're the one I need, you're the only thing I see,"*

When Jamie returned for her Cosmopolitan in a booth packed full of applause, Sana was already taking the mic from her, throwing a garishly pink feather boa from the prop chest over her black floral dress for Mona Lisa,* grinning right at Dahyun, whose jaw had already dropped during, *"Even if I just got one in a million, I'm gonna take my chances,"*

The oread got her revenge with unwinding the boa around Sana's neck and taking it for herself, whipping out a rafter-shaking cover of Domino*, with everyone in a five-foot vicinity head-banging to, *"Rock my world into the sunlight, make this dream the best of I've ever known,"*

"Dirty dancing in the moonlight, take me down like I'm a domino!"

It should have been enough of a warning when the sultry waltz drum and strings opening to Earned It* cued up to a million groans of distress the minute Yugyeom finished his Negroni and walked up onstage, Bambam moaning, "Oh, God," into his soju bottle.

"You make it look like it's magic,"

"Cause I see nobody, nobody but you, you, you,"

"Minho!" Yugyeom shouted midsong, pointing to the mic stand. "Can you raise this up?"

"Please don't," Chan told the djinn.

"I'm so used to being used," Minho crooned in his ear, raising the mic stand to the ceiling, eyes blowing wide and Chan choking on his drink as they switched back to Yugyeom and just what he was doing. "Oh, *no-*"

Yugyeom had taken to swinging himself dramatically around the pole Minho had so selflessly created, microphone to his lips as he sang, *"So I love when you call unexpected,"* to gales of raucous laughter and wolfish yells of appreciation. *"Cause I hate when the moment's expected."*

Courage gathered, Bambam followed it up with a less racy, somehow even more dynamic number: *Treasure** by Bruno Mars, Sana's margarita in his hand.

"Treasure, that it is what you are,"

"Honey, you're my golden star,"

"You know you could make my wish come true," he sang, hand extended to a giggly Yugyeom, *"If you let me treasure you."*

Just for the purpose of crowd control, Brian swept up in his place, trusting Dahyun with the rest of his whiskey sour, absolutely slaying a cover of *Fantasy** like Mariah Carey couldn't have managed: whole tables of monsters Chan and Minho had never met pointing across the room at them, yelling, *"But it's just a sweet, sweet fantasy, baby, when I close my eyes, you come and take me."*

"Hold my beer," Jae said as he left, dropping his empty Heineken bottle into Dahyun's finished Amaretto sour. He succeeded in

keeping the party going with an electric guitar falsetto of DNCE's Toothbrush* that had drinks and shots waving in the air like phone flashlights.

"Maybe you don't have to rush, you can leave a toothbrush at my place, at my place."

"For all the people single and fine with not mingling out here, I'll give us this one," Momo said into the mic, tossing her drained mojito glass to Yerin, who caught it on a faithful wind that blew it back onto the table; it rumbled as Midnight Sky* started up, with Momo unearthing a plastic crown from the prop chest. She couldn't have chosen a better song to suit her own rebellious spirit- born to run, not belonging to anyone -or to get said singles riled up and filling the air with a thunderclap of *"I don't need to be loved by you!"*

And Chan? He'd been waiting to pull his number out since the minute he saw Minho walk out their bathroom door in his outfit for the day.

"I'm burning through the sky, yeah,"* Chan sang out, dipping the entire mic stand. *"Two hundred degrees, that's why they call me Mister Fahrenheit,"*

"I'm driving at the speed of light, I wanna make a supersonic woman of you!" The drum bridge kicked in, and he lunged backwards, straightening up, the entire table clapping their hands to the beat. *"Don't stop me, don't stop me, don't stop me,"*

"Hey, hey, hey!" The entire bar yelled back.

"Don't stop me! Don't stop me!"

Minho and Sana cupped their hands around their mouths. *"Ooh, ooh, ooh!"*

The bar crowd resurrected the year of 1979 for yet another bisexual man storming his way through one of Queen's greatest hits, shouting

and kicking through the bridge, and in a cacophony of flashing lights and pelvic thrusting, the song blasted into the guitar solo, and not a single person was on their feet, not when Bang Chan himself was knee sliding across the stage, playing passionate and somewhat erotic air guitar.

Jinsoul climbed on top of the bar, taking a picture for Love Cherry Motion's history, Sana and Dahyun were absolutely beside themselves laughing, YugBam and Jaeparkhyungian had formed a kickline, and Minho was watching with his hands over his mouth as Chan leaped back on his feet.

"Oh, I'm burning through the sky, yeah! Two hundred degrees, that's why they call me Mister Fahrenheit!"

"I'm driving at the speed of light," his eyes found Minho's in a broad smile that gleamed into, *"I wanna make a supersonic man out of you!"*

A standing ovation from their table awaited him when he returned, gamely soaking it all in. Minho approached him slow-clapping. "Well done."

"Thanks," Chan replied. "I think I win."

"Win what?"

"Well, best performance of the night, of course."

Minho cocked a brow. "You sure about that?"

Knocking back the rest of his cocktail, he shouldered past Chan and climbed up onstage. A nod to Yerim, and the lights dimmed.

Suddenly they burst to life in a blinding flash of all consuming pink, illuminating a silhouette of Minho pulling the mic stand to him as a wicked guitar riff tore from the speakers, emphasized with drums and dubbed-in *"oh oh-oh's."*

“Aw, man,” groaned Brian. “His *signature*.”

The crowd’s unholy screams rekindled like new, like the first time, like they knew they weren’t going to be prepared for this.

“Jesus *Lord*,” said Jamie, lost in the wails as their group pulled Chan gaping back into his seat.

“*Got a figure like a pinup, got a figure like a doll**,” Minho sang, raking his hair back with one hand, heel of his boot tapping. “*Don’t care if you think I’m dumb, I don’t care at all.*”

“Holy Envy Adams,” mused Dahyun.

“*Candy bear, sweetie pie, wanna be adored.*” His eyes, bright and hazy and dark as the sweetest bourbon, locked on Chan. “*I’m the girl you’d die for.*”

Minho tore the mic off its stand and started down the catwalk straight for them on, “*I’ll chew you up, and I’ll spit you out,*” threw one foot on the table and leaned in on his knee, right in front of a stupefied Chan. “*Cause that’s what young love is all about.*”

The whole gang went shamelessly wild as Minho hooked two fingers under Chan’s pendulum and yanked him in devilishly close, smirking through, “*So pull me closer, and kiss me hard,*” and right as Chan looked like he just might, he was pushed back, smiling senselessly as Minho spun back down the catwalk. “*I’m gonna pop your bubblegum heart.*”

Minho touched the palms of gathering admirers like a royal and his subjects. “*I’m Miss Sugar Pink, liquor liquor lips,*”

“*Heal me with your sweet love, steal me with a kiss.*”

“*I’m Miss Sugar Pink, liquor liquor lips,*”

“*I’m gonna be your bubblegum bitch,*”

"I'm gonna be your bubblegum bitch!"

"You're fucking *gone*," Sana said to Chan, who was already getting up out of his seat.

"Don't I know it," Chan murmured, making his way to the edge of the catwalk.

By *"Queentex, latex, I'm your wonder maid,"* Minho already had his own throng of devotees crowded up against the stage like they'd been waiting for him all night, trying to get as close as they could without encroaching on his space. He soaked in the attention, preening in the spotlight colored just for him, a rock star in a \$120 blazer and roseated Queen t-shirt. *"Life gave me some lemons, so I made some lemonade."*

"Soda pop, soda pop, baby here I come,"

"Straight to number one,"

And Chan loved it- loved every inch of the whole scene, from the music to the lights to even the strangers bumping his shoulders, his friends clambering on shoulders and seats to get a good filming angle. It all lit up around Minho, fuelled his fiery charisma, and Chan loved the way it looked on him.

But all he could see was the gold manacles around his wrists showing beneath his cuffs, the one piece of the puzzle that never fit. *The one thing holding him back from being truly free.*

"Man," sighed the lanky guy next to him, adoring eyes on Minho. "I'd love to take *that* home tonight."

Now *that* pulled Chan out of his thoughts. "Then find someone else." Chan glared him down, growled through his fangs, "Because he's with *me*."

A bob of his Adam's apple, and the guy was gone, lost in a writhing world of rose pink. The show carried on through the second chorus, Minho vibing through every moment, an electric streak of dopamine. He didn't seem to be focused on anything else.

But then Minho was looking down at him again, disheveled and intent, light sheen of sweat over his honeyed skin, looking like Dionysus fresh from a ritual. His expression was incorrigibly wicked.

"I think I want you, your Australian tan," he crooned, and Chan's face split into a messy grin as every member of their friend group screamed. *"Oh, oh, oh,"* Minho accepted the hand he offered, guiding him to the ground level. *"I think you're gonna be my biggest fan."*

He chucked the mic over his shoulder to Yerin, let Chan pull him in, and they danced- fast paced swing, Charleston footwork, twirls twisting them this way and that, which Jamie and Brian thankfully moved the tables for; a ballroom blitz of a dance break that definitely made the choreographer to Footloose tear up his drafts. They lived the moment in each other, just as they had every decade, skipping through continents and clubs, reveling in the love and power they had just by being together. A little chaotic for a *la vie en rose*, but hey- wasn't that the best way to get through life with the one you loved?

Just as Chan was whirling Minho towards him for the finale, the djinn disappeared in a flare of white, reappeared on the stage dropped dramatically to his knees, mic in hand like he'd been there all along. *"I'm Miss Sugar Pink, liquor liquor lips,"* he grinned at Chan's slackened jaw, clicked it shut with a finger and a boop to his nose while singing, *"Heal me with your sweet love, steal me with a kiss."*

"I'm Miss Sugar Pink, liquor liquor lips,"

"I'm gonna be your bubblegum bitch!" shouted the building along with him.

"I'm gonna be your bubblegum bitch!"

An hour later, friends sent on their ways, and their mission complete, they took the trek back to Levanter on their own, giggling half-drunk and slurring their steps in time.

"I concede," Chan managed through laughter. "You win best performance of the night."

"Of course I do." Then, slyly: "Would you describe it as *supersonic*?"

"*Fuck* you," Chan cackled. "You still won't let that go?"

"*Fuck no*. I loved it- I didn't know you played guitar."

"Only for your pleasure, love." He breathed out satisfaction as their home came into view, neon still flickering. "That was fun. You had fun, right?"

"That, I did. Man, happiness is such a weird emotion to feel so often."

"Are you, though?" Chan peered at him under his lashes, hesitant. "Happy?"

Minho untangled his nerves with the sure squeeze of his hand, sliced through the knots with a smile. "I've got everything I want here. Of course I'm happy."

They'd arrived at the door. Chan didn't reach for the keys. "Let's hope you mean that."

Minho's brows furrowed, lifted just as fast as he pushed the door open. From the lobby entrance through the open main room doors, their path was lined with candles- the deep purple ones with mismatched height that they broke out for a house spell or Ostara.

Chan lead him down silently through to courtyard and into the training yard, where the others were waiting in a circle.

"What is all this?"

"I know you said no gifts this year, but I wanted to try one more time." Jeongin passed up the cloth-wrapped shape, and Chan took it, unfolded Minho's lamp. "I'm happy with the life that I have- with what you've given me, what we've found on our own. And I know you say you are too, but I don't want it to be a half truth anymore. I don't want you to have to lie for my benefit. And I don't want you to feel like you have anything tying you down. So." The vampire swallowed. "One last time. If you're okay with it."

Minho shifted back, taking in their coven around him, the hopeful uncertainty on Chan's face, the plan must've been hidden from him for weeks. "What else could we even try, Chan? We've done everything."

"Not everything. Because we've always left out the most vital component: you."

"Me?"

"It's like you said before, like you've been saying for years- you never asked me to help you. It was always what spell could be done to you, what tonic could you drink, what shady wizard do we have to meet? And just seeing you, being with you for so long, it's helped me realize that freedom isn't something we can give to you- it's what you've make for yourself. That's what you've always done."

Chan put the lamp in Minho's hands, the weight of it like Atlas' burden. "Minho." Just the word weighed as much as the entire damn planet. "I give my last wish to you."

A breeze blew. A bolt of lightning on a night encapsulated by the moon. Minho felt no mist over his senses, no gravitational pull. Now

he had the power- now *he* could wish for anything he wanted, whether it be petty or useless or rash or great. *Anything I want...*

He watched the boys hold their breath, frozen with anticipation, Chan watching anxiously with them. The podunk, four star, nearly magical motel he was standing in, and inside of it, his room he shared with someone he loved, his familiars and one dopey little hellhound. The solid ground he could always float back to, land on and count on.

Minho's eyes panned back down to the lamp in his hands, the ball at the end of his chains, the vessel that had taken him all around the world, from the black market to the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean to the shores of Portland, where its journey had ended- left him a stray in a world he could have never survived in on his own. Now it shivered under the moonlight, a hunk of pyrite, begging for forgiveness, a lock presenting the key to prevent its walls from being broken.

"Fuck these chains." Minho's grip on the lamp tightened, fingers denting glowing cracks in the metal. "Fuck this *lamp*."

"Oh shit," piped Changbin.

It gave the rest of the crew about five seconds to cover their eyes before Minho crushed the lamp in an explosion of celestial matter.

A galaxy of sparks both iridescent and golden burst before their eyes, shimmering in glimpses of art deco, Bacardi bottles, caviar and black velvet. They twinkled like stars, stage glitter sparkling in the spray of an uproar, drifted upward into the clouds, joining the stars above.

For a moment, that was it. A shimmering sky and nothing more.

But then: a click of metal. Minho's left manacle snapped, fell to the ground, and then the right. Both of them poofed into yellow dust, melted into the grass.

“Minho?” Chan’s voice wavered, too scared to hope. “You feel okay?”

Minho could only stand there, feel the skin around his wrists- that shit actually *did* exist -feel a new surge of blood rush through his veins. “Oh.” He flexed his fingers, watched the stars spark to life under the tips. “Oh, yeah.”

Without another spoken word, Minho popped off the face of earth, cackling with abandon up into the night, whooping in front of the moon. “I’m fucking *free, bitches!*”

His voice echoed loud enough for the boys to cheer with him, laugh in amazement as he charged out on a victory lap around what might as well have been the entire town that could have blasted through light years, seconds, wrinkles in time being straightened out. In a lucent silver aura, Minho came barreling back down like a meteor returning to earth, straight into Chan’s arms.

“*Thank you,*” he breathed into his ear in earnest, half-sobbing sincerity.

What might have been even more amazing was that Chan wasn’t even fazed- he just kept right on grinning. “I told you, didn’t I?” He folded his arms around him. “I told you.”

“Group hug?” asked Jisung hopefully.

“What the fuck do you *think*, Sungie?” Minho laughed, not even trying to hide his tears of joy. “Get your asses in here, all of you.”

And so they did.

The night ended with opening the bottle of champagne out of the fridge saved for an occasion that couldn’t possibly be more special than this, raising a glass to freedom (“*Something they can never take away,*” sang JiLix), along with the brownies Felix had made just for this night. Taking the tray to the main room couch, they put on Hello,

Dolly! as one last tradition, each making a promise to stay awake until the end.

By the time the chorus started up on It Only Takes A Moment*, Changbin was asleep on Hyunjin's shoulder, not quite but almost drooling, while the latter had his head balanced on top of his. Jeongin was dozing curled up under Jisung's flannel at the foot of the recliner, taken up by an actual sprawled-out Jisung. Seungmin and Felix snored softly by in the middle of the couch, arms around each other, tin of brownies sandwiched between them. As per tradition, only Minho and Chan were awake on the left and right sides of the couch, hands twined over the sleeping angel and gumiho right into Irene's line of: *"It only takes a moment to be loved a whole life long."*

The screen panned down to Cornelius taking her hand in his. *"And that is all that love's about,"*

"And we'll recall, when time runs out,"

Chan squeezed Minho's hand, shot him another private smile through another one of their songs. "Happy anniversary, love."

As the happy couple on their TV walked off into the night, Minho smiled back. "Happy anniversary, Chan." He couldn't wait for the next one.

Teenage Dream - Katy Perry

*Can't Take My Eyes off You - Frankie Valli

*This Hell - Rina Sawayama

*Valerie - Amy Winehouse

*Love On Top - Beyoncé

*Mona Lisa - OBB

*Domino - Jessie J

*Earned It - The Weeknd

*Treasure - Bruno Mars

*Fantasy - Mariah Carey

*Toothbrush - DNCE

*Midnight Sky - Miley Cyrus

*Don't Stop Me Now - Queen

*Bubblegum Bitch - MARINA

*It Only Takes A Moment - Michael Crawford

*White carnation: sweetness, innocent love

Part 2 - broken

Chapter 18: Part 2 - broken

And into part 2 of the saga we go!

With a HyunSung backstory + a flash to the past, I think you guys can tell what this one's going to be about. Let's just hope you're ready for it.

I like that you're broken, broken like me,

Maybe that makes me a fool

I like that you're lonely, lonely like me,

I could be lonely with you...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Eldritch, Oregon - 1985

Jisung closed the lobby exit behind him, dropped his suitcase and stepped grandly out into the inner courtyard. "Honey, I'm home!"

The sleepy groans of Minho and Chan grumbled from behind the walls of room 17. "Fuck you," Changbin growled. He had definitely fallen asleep on the couch watching The Golden Girls again- regardless of the time being ten thirty at night.

Man, it was good to be back.

Not that it hadn't been a pleasure freeing one of Oregon's several ghost towns' citizens of their eternal sin due to a shit deal their late

sheriff had made with a dickbag devil. A week long job just did that to you- especially when it was all the way in Wasco County.

Still, rules were rules: as long as you lived under Levanter's roof, you had to pay to keep it dry. With Chan and Minho running the motel, he and Changbin had to get creative to do their part. Fortunately, the bulletin board in the lobby always had some interesting options- no matter what jobs they took together, nothing would ever be able to top easing the Jersey Devil out of the Vietnam Veterans of Oregon Memorial.

But celebration and glory days could wait. First matter of business: the garden.

On a flat stretch of land, strangler figs sprouted from the earth formed a loopy, weblike dome, with creeper ivy netted over any openings, making windows that kept the pests out and let the sunlight in. Inside, brushing aside a curtain of the vines: witchcraft plants, herbs, and literally any flower with cool symbolism. Calla lilies*, mint, tuberose all growing next to each other across from the nasturtium*, basil, and sage. Color coded, separated by a peristyle structure, and blooming as high and wide as nature permitted, Jisung had even made a small profit selling to the madremonite's greenhouse (she called him Ardillito - he didn't know a lick of Spanish but it sounded nice) whenever the seasons required it- come the Yule celebrations, and the poinsettias were flying off the shelves. The best part was, he never had to worry about making room; whenever he wanted to plant something new, he could just expand the walls and add it in.

It wasn't much, compared to what he used to have. But was still life- and it was beautiful.

In the shape of a U around a center row of white flora, each bed bloomed in the shades of rainbow order: red at the left base, fading to orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink on the right. When one really wanted to, they could simply promenade up and down the aisles, breathe in the sweet mingling scent of lemongrass and

lavender, brush by the rouge ranunculi, marigolds, sunflowers, bells of Ireland, delphiniums, candytufts, and- “Wait a goddamn minute.”

Who the *fuck* touched the phlox?

Creeping phlox: symbolizing of unity and harmony, best-selling during the summer, very much for the aesthetic. However, seeing a whole arbitrarily grabbed chunk missing was very much not correct.

This place had been enchantment-proofed from greedy claws and beaks, but not hands. Both Minho and Chan knew how special the garden was to them- Changbin had learned not to touch his babies when he wasn't around when he'd gotten a root slap to the wrist for making a petal fall from an orchid.

Which meant... “There is an intruder among us.” Therefore: someone was dying tonight.

Dusting the dirt off his knees, Jisung cracked his knuckles, lunged past the curtain and stormed after the trail of plucked petals that lead out the curtain door.

”Just wanted to go home, check on the moonflowers, then dip off to bed but, *no*, no no no, someone just decided they wanted to end it all... with a fucking five-foot-seven ball of fury for a *fucking* reaper...”

Each petal was a clue, an absent minded scatterplot leading farther into the forest, forcing him to push dark-leaved branches out of his line sight as he followed. *It's as if they'd just been dropped and trampled over.* Like they didn't even care.

Jisung touched a hand to the trunk of a tree, watched the trail slow to a trickle of one, two, three crooked petals that no doubt lead to the zenith, felt the brambles crawl up and curl around his knuckles, granting him the ability to properly punch a fuck in the face. He would dream happily about their fear.

Fear fuel. Nice ring to that.

As he kept walking, the flowing wind grew louder, more melodic, and- wait. Was that Frank Sinatra?

He listened deeper. Nope, definitely not the wind- that was a voice. Light, susurrant, almost unearthly so, but a voice. *And if my hunch is right, it'll belong to the thief.*

Jisung's grip tightened on the bramble knuckles. How this bastard just thought they could just sit around with *his* property in *his* home was *beyond* smug, it was *abhorrent*, it was *unholy*, it was-

"Fly me to the moon, and let me play among the stars,"

The being he saw in the clearing made Jisung forget all about Jupiter and Mars.

Whoa.

Shrouded in darkness, the moon serving as a spotlight, the figure knelt before the pond, long limbs folded like an egret, in a worn Joy Division cutoff shirt and ripped jeans- a rebel fallen from grace. One hand listlessly stirred the water; the other clutched a slipping bouquet of blushing phlox. A river of scarlet hair was tucked behind his ear, fell in a curtain on the other side of his face: a pale moonlight portrait of low-lidded eyes, the sharp stroke of a jawline, shaded flick of a cheekbone, all blurred soft in the throes of nostalgia. He gazed through the looking glass water, lips moving through the lyrics.

"Fill my heart with song, and let me sing forever more,"

Jisung could practically hear the gloxinias popping up around his feet, feel the brambles receding out of his hand as the grip loosened, dropped to his side. He wanted to apologize for existing even though he hadn't even been seen, sink into the grass itself, melt into the enchanting sway of the sound.

"In other words, please be true,"

"In other words, I love..."

The stranger's words trailed off as his gaze slid up the pond, found the toes of Jisung's boots at the edge of the clearing entrance. Slowly, he looked up.

"Who the hell are *you*?"

His voice, husky in a growl, skidded off a grated edge. The color of his eyes shifted from seafoam to the entire ocean.

Jisung remembered the trail he was standing on, the reason he was here. "I-" Throat cleared. Voice regained. "I, uh- sorry, sorry, I-I was just-" *Wait*. "Wai- who are *you*?"

The stranger rolled his eyes. "'Course. Can't get *one* moment alone here."

"What are you talking about? What are you doing here?"

"I should ask you the same thing."

"Pretty sure I asked first."

"'Asked *first*?' What the hell are you, five?"

"Well, I think I have a right to know who's waxing poetic at the pond in the place where *I* live."

"*I* live here!"

"I would know it if you did."

"And I would know if I saw *you* walk in, and your fake-grunge flannel."

"Fake- how *dare* you! I didn't say shit about your Sex Pistols ripoff band shirt!"

"Jeez, so glad you interrupted my mourning just to *insult* me."

"It's called basic karma- happens when you steal someone else's shit."

"How can I *steal* something from someone I haven't even *met*?"

"Check the flowers in your hand- wanna guess whose garden that came from?"

The stranger's nose wrinkled. "*That* was a garden?"

Just as quickly as they'd bloomed, the gloxinias were wilting. So much for fucking enchantment. "You're not even gonna say you're sorry?"

"Well, there wasn't exactly a sign that said I *couldn't*."

"Nothing but common decency, which you clearly don't have."

"Cause you're one to talk."

"Oh, because I cut short your midnight jam session? My sincerest apologies, really."

"Jesus H Christ, *what* is going on?" Chan burst through the clearing entrance behind Jisung, hair a rat's nest, still in his sleep sweats.

"How was I able to hear you two from here?"

They pointed at each other. "*Tell him to leave!*"

Chan's eyes weren't even fully open yet. "What."

"He stole from my garden!" Jisung shouted.

"*He* invaded my privacy!" The stranger countered.

"Come on, Chan," Jisung pleaded. "I've been here since the soldiers walked into Vietnam. I haven't asked you for much. Banish him, evict

him- it won't make much of a difference."

"Didn't you say I could stay as long as I wanted?" The stranger butted in. "If you kicked me out now, you'd be breaking that promise. Just get Minhó to blink him into another dimension!"

"Okay, first of all," Chan said, holding out a Shut The Fuck Up hand for silence. "I love that man way too much to wake him up for this shit- also he would sooner smite the both of you with a burning meteor. Second, I'm not doing either of that."

"But he's an asshole!" complained the stranger.

"And *he's* a prick!" added Jisung.

"And legally, you're both allowed to be here," concluded Chan.

"But why him?"

"Oh, my- Jisung, God, you've been gone for a *week*, did you not think we'd get at least one new guest in that time?" Jisung opened his mouth. "Do not say what I know you're going to say." Closed it. "Obviously, you've already met, but this here is Hyunjin, one of our newest guests. Arrived two days ago."

"Actually didn't get a name, now that you mention it," Jisung replied. "Can't say I'm charmed."

Hyunjin scoffed. "Fucking sure you weren't."

"Don't flatter yourself-"

"*Guys!*" Chan drew in a breath, carefully brought it back in. "Listen. I am running on four ibuprofen, one homemade-therefore-shittily-made B52, and a quart of blood from what was disclosed as a human's arm but I am suspecting is a coyote. I do not have the time, will, or energy to deal with your shit right now, and Minhó himself told me that if I do not return in under ten minutes, he will have his cats sniff me out. I don't have to explain to you what that means, right?"

Glumly, they relented, muttered, "Right."

"So here's the deal. You guys agree not to kill each other, I go back to sleep, and we all try to live a peaceful coexistence together. Can we manage that?"

Stubborn, pouty silence- a whole abyss length of the shit.

"Fine," spat Jisung.

"Can't make any promises," Hyunjin grumbled.

"You better try," Chan told him. He ended his lecture with a yawn. "Right. I'm gonna fall on my pillow and hope the force is enough to knock me out. I better not see any blood trails in the morning."

He trudged into the shadow of the nearest tree, leaving them alone again.

Hyunjin rolled back on his heels, looked back at Jisung with contempt. "How long were you even standing there before I saw you?"

Jisung's ears burned. "Does that matter now?" He couldn't imagine how he'd managed to let his appearance fool him so extremely. "What were you saying about mourning?"

The storm inside of Hyunjin's red rimmed glare looked like the inspiration for Alexandre Cabanel's fallen angel. "Like you'd fucking get it."

He brushed past the trees out of the clearing, diving through his own opening, leaving the clump of phlox discarded on the bank of the pond.

From there, it began.

The mornings started out peaceful: Chan and Minho sipping coffee at the dining table over the morning newspaper, Changbin on one side of the couch, a breakfast omelette paired with a protein shake, Jisung on the other side trying to engross himself in another half-assed Regency classic.

Hyunjin walked in from the main room, avocado toast in one hand, and they pretended coolly not to notice one another.

He coasted by the couch, snuck a glance over Jisung's shoulder. "She ends up with the older brother," he said nonchalantly, knowing full well he wasn't even halfway through the book.

"Eat a dick," Jisung muttered, glaring at the tiny font.

"What, are you offering yours?"

Jisung looked up. Hyunjin was already watching from a challenging side glance, waiting for his reaction.

Chan and Minho tensed up. Changbin sighed and dropped his fork on his plate.

Then a root snapped out of the ground and knocked Hyunjin's toast to the floor, just as a comet of pondwater shot out from the backyard and splattered the pages of Jisung's book.

"Oh, that's it—"

"You slimy little—"

Jisung leaped over the couch and Hyunjin lunged. Before they could even properly retaliate, their designated defenses had taken their places.

"Let me at him!" Jisung screeched, trying furiously to get out of Chan's grasp.

"You won't even make a dent in me, twig!" Hyunjin sneered behind Minho.

"It's been *two fucking days!*" Changbin screamed from between them.

Yeah. Usually they ended a little something like that.

Maybe it had been meant to happen from the start- earth versus water, two contradicting elements too drastically different and chaotically similar to do anything but circle each other in the cage match they were pitted inside of, striking when they thought the other without a comeback, battling fiercely over middle ground. As much as their roommates tried to wedge their way in between, there was just no way they could keep them far apart long enough to make the distance impactful. With both of them too bitter and headstrong to let anything go or- hell forbid -apologize, the hole just kept getting deeper and deeper.

But like all cages, they trapped not only the body, but the mind as well.

There were more reasons other than just being bound to the same walls that they kept coming back to each other. Whatever the purpose- knowing your opponent, keeping friends close and enemies closer -they could never stay away for too long without getting curious. With Chan and Minho very purposefully staying out of the way, Changbin was the go-to guy for anything they might want to know.

"Okay, like, I don't care," Jisung rambled, following a disinterested Changbin down the catwalk.

"Obviously," said Changbin. "But-"

"What is his *deal* with beaches? Is it a siren thing? Like, it so doesn't go with the whole rough-and-tough riot boy image he's trying to pull- plus he's almost as pale as Chan, so no, not buying it. But *seriously*,

they're *all* he draws. And he doesn't even use color, just pencil and charcoal. It's just so *inconsistent*."

"You done?"

Jisung aimed a root slap at the back of his head. Changbin dodged it without turning around. "I don't know a whole lot," the demon confessed, "but from what he has told us, he grew up on a beach. Far from here- somewhere in the Triangle."

"Shit. Actually?" Nod. "How did he end up here?"

"Chan brought him in from the shore." Changbin nudged him with an elbow. "You might get a better answer if you ask him yourself."

"*Pffft*. Please. Like I'd sink that low."

"Even though you want to."

Jisung gaped. "I- wha- I do not!" Changbin smirked. "I *don't*, alright? Come on, why would I? He doesn't want to talk to me, so I don't talk to him. Every time we do, we always end up fighting."

"Because neither one of you can stop going for the throat. It doesn't have to happen!"

"As far as I know, it's the only thing that can happen."

"Do you really want it to? Come on- you can't tell me you enjoy fighting that guy every day. Obviously, you guys got off on the wrong foot. Talk to him. Please. If not for you, then for me."

Jisung scoffed. "It hasn't even been a week. You think I'm that breakable?"

"No." Changbin patted his shoulder, passed him by. "Just stubborn."

In the courtyard, Hyunjin had taken a corner of the couch, huddled knees-up with a sketchpad. As he tied his hair up, Jisung could make

out what he was working on: not a landscape, but a portrait. The side profile of a man too beautiful to be real, with sketched details that could only be pulled from memory. "Hm."

"It doesn't matter," Hyunjin went on, an afternoon in the training yard, moving his mitts in accordance to Changbin's punches. "Literally less of a shit could be given."

"And yet-"

"It just seems so pointless to me. Why put that much value in one little garden?"

"Why ask questions you don't care about," grunted Changbin, throwing another cross.

"I'm not trying to get to *know* him, or anything- not when he's not interested in knowing me. It's simply a matter of curiosity." Just as much as he could while still retaining focus, Changbin rolled his eyes. "Like, I didn't know it was his. I didn't think much of it at all- just couldn't get much sleep and started walking. Has he always been uptight about it with you?"

"'Uptight' wouldn't be the right word to use."

"Why not?" Changbin ignored him, continued the drill. "Come on, tell me."

Changbin pulled back, irate. "Before Eldritch, he lived in a forest. Spent his entire life around nature."

Oh. "Crap. Are you serious?"

"Yup. Best buds with the birds and bees. Anything else?"

The sliding glass exit to the main room opened, and Jisung trudged through headed for the garden, a full bag of mulch hefted on his shoulder. "I think I'm good."

Changbin dropped his gloves tiredly, pulling at the Velcro binding with his teeth. "He'd be willing to answer your questions. Least more than me."

The words were so surprising Hyunjin only heard them in their echo, in the inference they left behind. "Tell me you're not serious."

"I'm just saying you have the option."

"Which I would've *taken*, had I actually *cared*. Come on, Changbin- you of everyone here knows that I have a lot more on my mind."

"And I'm not insinuating that isn't important, I'm just, y'know. Poking around at what's right in front of me here and now."

"Well, I'd prefer if you wouldn't. It doesn't matter, alright? It's fine."

Changbin scoffed. "Jeez. Jisung was right- you really don't know how to pick a lane."

Hyunjin's jaw dropped. "You've been talking to him about me?"

"He wants to know. And, instead of asking you himself, the both of you have been taking the time out of *my* day to ask questions you could just as easily ask each other." Tossing his gloves over his shoulder, the demon started back up the hill. "It's not holding your own. It's being stupid. Talk to him."

Even if it was mostly little details that were pestered out of Changbin- both the angel and devil on their shoulders -little glimpses of moments they never meant to catch in the house, each revelation served as a surprise. Which was equal parts frustrating and worthless. It was easy enough to think you knew everything about someone based simply on their surface- that was only the natural thing to feel when they proved you wrong. But it wouldn't lead to anything. Jisung had a life to live, and Hyunjin had one to get back to; a goal which he'd spent approximately every hour of his time at Eldritch chasing.

Room 25: calming faded blue wallpaper, ash gray carpets, king size in the center with the headboard touching the wall, same as all the other Levanter rooms. The window to the right was surrounded by dusty noir landscape sketches of the same beach different points of view: behind the cliff, overlooking the dunes, even wading in water. The wall facing the bed was a board of tacked-up files and photographs connected by kitchen twine to two hand drawn portraits of a young man and woman- an evidence board that would have been approved by any crazed detective.

Well, it wasn't *that* crazy just yet- what with only three days of extensive research taken to the library of Eldritch, as well as some other shady alleyways and helpful tidbits from Minho and Chan. But whatever clue got Hyunjin closer to finding his brother and sister, bringing them back together and finally, *finally* going back home with them, up on the board it went. No distractions allowed.

Even if said distraction was going about wringing his hands, muttering to himself just *how* he could talk to him and see just where their first meet went so wrong.

"Just stop overthinking it, you know how to do this shit. Just walk up, say you're sorry- who am I fooling, I'm not *sorry*, what reason do I have to be-? *Fuck*. Okay. Come on, doesn't matter. Focus. Just talk to him, start with that. See what happens."

As bright of a social front Jisung put up through lighthearted jokes and well-placed charisma, detangling a situation like this with a guy like Hyunjin was way out of his comfort zone. Any time he reached a hand out, he snatched it back in stinging from a different barb. It probably wasn't even worth bothering- Hyunjin clearly had other things on his mind. Things that *weren't* fixing whatever existed between them. Things that were probably, most definitely making up the reason why he was constantly running back and forth from his room with the files and newspaper clippings handed off to him by Chan.

Which. Well. Didn't make Jisung exactly curious. But then again, if Levanter was housing a conspiracist, that would be something he'd like to have known. And also, while he was at it, the reason why Hyunjin hated him so much.

It might've been a little much to bargain, but, while he was still here, he might as well put that matter to rest.

If I survive the attempt, thought Jisung, peeking out from the door of his bedroom as Hyunjin came strolling out from the lobby exit, his binder of files in his arms. *Fuck it.*

He bloomed a white poppy in his hand- a peace offering -then crushed it, stomped it into the ground like a cigarette, thinking better. When Hyunjin caught sight of him walking out into the inner circle, his ocean eyes were a cool, placidly appalled teal. "Here for round six?"

Jisung got this close to spitting, *I'm not obsessed with you*, and bit back the reply with impressive self-restraint. "No," he replied. "I just... saw you walk in. Wanted to see how you were doing."

Hyunjin blinked. "That's uncharacteristic."

This is like trying to talk to an evil snail. "Just thought I'd try it."

"Might need some breaking in."

"Y'know, if you could maybe *not* make your usual little jabs at me for once, that'd be super."

"Who put you up to this? Was it Changbin?"

"No." A dark, fickle eyebrow raised. "It might've been a suggestion."

"So you *have* been talking to him about me."

"Not like-" Jisung scrapped the sentence. "I haven't- how did you-?"

"You're here now. Want to file any complaints?"

Fucking hell- "Look, I know we're not exactly seeing eye to eye at the moment, but for *one* second could we try being civil and see where that gets us *maybe* just so Chan and Minho and Changbin stop lecturing us like two fucking five-year-olds?"

They stood there for five silent, conversationless seconds too long for it to be brushed off. Hyunjin's face was inscrutable. Jisung could feel the resolve he'd built up to walk out and face him beginning to wilt.

"Fine."

Pause. Double take. "'Fine?'"

A tiny smirk tugged at the corner of Hyunjin's mouth. "As long as you don't distract me too much."

Jisung eyed the folder in his hands. It might've been a trick of the light, but the thing seemed to have gotten bigger since yesterday. "Yes, sir."

Hyunjin turned on his heel and stalked off; he only seemed slightly startled when Jisung followed after him. He took up the body of the couch, and Jisung resigned himself to the top of the backrest-sharing the space was a certain level of intimacy they weren't ready for yet.

"So." Another challenging look. "There a reason why you're always running around town?"

Hyunjin kept one hand on the binder. "I've got a couple things I need to find."

"Like for a job?"

"No. Just for me." He leaned back, boring up into the drifting clouds. "I'm getting out of here."

“Levanter hasn’t been that bad to you, has it?”

“Not Levanter.”

Jisung paused on his pointed expression. “I’m starting to think that was directed towards me.”

“No, the other dipshit who gets up at five in the morning to sing John Denver to his beavers.”

“Excuse *me*, it’s a perfectly normal thing to sing to animals.”

“They don’t even know your name.”

“They know my face! *And* my voice.”

“Bet they wish they couldn’t.”

“Fuck off and tell that to the bluejays. They make wonderful harmonies.”

Hyunjin scoffed. “Sure, Snow fucking White.”

“You want Snow White? You just sit here and listen.”

Jisung jumped off the side of the couch, rounded and stepped up on top of the coffee table. Hyunjin saw what was coming a mile away.

“No, no, no, fucking no-“

Head thrown back to the clouds, Jisung sang: “*And even though we ain’t got money**,”

“Lord-“

“*I’m so in love with you honey, and everything will bring a chain of love,*”

“All *hells*.” A spurt of water shot him in the chest, knocked him stumbling to the ground. With a flick of his wrist, Hyunjin sent it back

into the pond. "I already hear enough of that in the morning!"

But the message had been delivered and received- the bluejays were fluttering out of the window he'd left open, forming an upwards bluebell cyclone, petals taking the form of feathers, chasing after a chittering tune of the lyrics Jisung hadn't finished: *And in the morning, when I rise, you bring a tear of joy to my eyes...*

Hyunjin gaped. On his back, Jisung whooped. "*And tell me everything's gonna be all right.*"

As the birds flew away, the siren looked back down at him, all grinning satisfaction. "You look happy."

"I am."

"Jeez- don't get too smug. They're probably gonna turn against you when you run out of birdseed, or whatever."

"Aw, you do care." Jisung laced his hands behind his head. "I'm learning all your hidden depths today."

Hyunjin stared down at him- this goofy little spriggan with his too-big jackets and boot crossed over a propped-up leg. "Didn't I tell you *not* to distract me?"

"Doesn't look like you're hating it too much."

With a bit of a start, Hyunjin realized he wasn't.

Instead of admitting so- because that would have been a level of pathetic that no one would have been able to rise from -he ducked his head at the file beside him, hiding the smile that has begun to form.

Had Jisung looked hard enough, he might've seen it. Had he not pushed any more, it might've grown.

But instead, he asked: "What's in the file?"

Hyunjin's smile froze. Cracked and fell away. "None of your business."

"Well, it can't be anything that bad, if Chan's helping you. Even he has his limits."

"So, what? You're spying now?"

"When did I ever say that?" He scoffed tersely, tucked his binder under his arm and rose up. Jisung shot to his feet to follow. "What's the big idea? I thought we were getting friendlier."

"Just because I smiled *once* at one of your idiot jokes? Please."

"That was a genuine smile?" Instead of answering, Hyunjin strode off in the other direction. "What'd I do?"

"You overstepped, that's what you did." His voice seethed out of his lips like the steam of a geyser. *He'd be willing to answer your questions.* Bullshit. "Changbin must've been lying to-"

"Enough about him, alright? He didn't make me do anything! I've been trying to talk to you for days!"

"By insulting and throwing plants at me? Great tactic."

"Only because you can't stop being an obtuse fucking asshole for a full minute." A green root darted up from the dirt and coiled around Hyunjin's wrist, spinning him around. "Just tell me. Here and now."

Hyunjin snatched his hand away. "What could you possibly want from me?"

"I don't know, maybe the reason why you've been a dick to me since the minute I got here? Literally what else could I want?"

"*I'm* the dick? You're the one who looked at me once and accused me of being a squatter!"

"Don't forget the thief part."

"Oh, come *on*. It wasn't like I trashed the whole place- all I took was a couple flowers, and you acted like I'd flooded everything!"

"Don't say that." The quiver in Jisung's voice sliced through the courtyard, dropped the hard set to Hyunjin's jaw by a tremor. He pushed it down; there was no way in any hell that existed he was going to cry in front of him. "You have no idea what happened. How it *felt*."

"How what felt?"

"Take a wild fucking guess." His tone had taken on the sharp, blunt points of jungle thorns. "You just said it."

At first, Hyunjin didn't even know. Didn't even remember what he said. But when the realization dawned, it bled through everything: it made the gray afternoon clouds heavy as lead, sunk the remnants of summoned pond dew into the dirt, washed the last three days of fighting in a whole new light. The flowers, the hospice, the little flinch Jisung did every time a new rush of water was sent his way. He'd just thought it was a reaction, a simple tell. "I didn't know."

"Quit acting like you fucking care," Jisung snapped, with the same hardheaded defense that hadn't tired out all week. "You've made that clear enough."

Whatever sympathy Hyunjin had felt disappeared behind his own shield. "Do you want to know what I'm looking for? *Why* I'm here?" He tossed his binder - his single, precious binder full of information - to the floor at Jisung's feet, where it spread open in a pool of papers. "Here. Eat your fucking heart out."

It was all out there in the open- all the scraps and dog-eared corners and looseleaf papers he'd dug through dank alleys and forgotten libraries to find, notebook pages scattered among printed audio clips, blurry photographs and sketched portraits with the detail of any

missing persons picture. Jisung's eyes locked instantly on the charcoal haired man he'd seen Hyunjin drawing just yesterday. His eyes were the same North Atlantic blue that reflected in Hyunjin's. *The mourning.* "Couldn't you have just told me that?"

"And said what? Would it even have made a difference? You have no idea what it's like to -"

"What? Have everything you've ever loved and cared about torn away from you? Yeah, I have no idea what that's like."

The blue of Hyunjin's eyes had frozen into ice, steely polarity meeting a stormy viridan gaze. Two soldiers from opposite sides, glaring eye to eye.

Chan burst through the door right in the middle of it. "Hyunjin! Hyunjin, I got-" Seeing the stare off, he wasn't even mad anymore- just disappointed. "Not even gonna ask what happened, just gonna. Slide in between it, get those pictures outta the way, yep." Standing in front of Hyunjin, he said: "I got the lead."

That got the siren's attention on him. "What? You did?"

"The bunker's in Astoria, property of two hunters - two assholes who calls themselves the Worcester brothers - but Yubin helped me find the coordinates. If I get there soon, we could see if they really have information on your siblings."

"How-" Hyunjin struggled with his words, scrambling to find the right ones. "How soon could you get there?"

"Tonight." Chan turned to Jisung. "And you're coming with."

Jisung guffawed. "What'd I do this time?"

"You're not being punished- Changbin's coming too. If we're gonna do this well and do it right, we're gonna need the dream team."

"It's *his* family- why can't he just do it?" By Chan's shoulder, Hyunjin flipped him off.

"Because if these guys really has eyes on both his brother and his sister, who's to say they don't have eyes on him too? It'd be too risky- plus, you need to get out of the house." He flicked his eyes back to Hyunjin, giving up the double meaning to his sentence. "The car's out front. Minho's got the gear ready. Changbin called dibs on the front seat. We can't lose any more daylight."

Hyunjin stooped down to gather up his files, shyly handed Chan the portraits he'd so painstakingly chiseled into paper as references. "Fine."

After years of searching, Hyunjin couldn't believe he was coming so close.

It felt like every note he'd found, every scrapbook and picture had lead up to this: living people, real people who had information on both Yeji and Jinyoung. He could know their locations tonight, whether they were dead or alive, whether they were looking for him too. He didn't care whether or not he had to hop a bus across the globe or garrote the answers out of those damn hunters himself. Whatever was in that bunker concerning his family, he was going to find out.

As the dream team of '3Racha,' as Chan called them, walked out the door, Minho handed them three crystal blue pins to stick to their shirts.

"Rune-encrypted lacrimas- doubling as cameras and microphones. Lose them, and I'll switch the places of your nose and mouth," Minho said, just as easily as one might have told their child to have a good day at school.

"That was a joke, right?" asked Hyunjin.

"You know the saying? How you never know until you know?" said Chan, to which he shook his head. "We try to play it safe enough as to not find out."

He hopped into the driver's seat of the black SUV, Changbin into the passenger's. As the radio cued up a Blue Öyster Cult guitar intro, Hyunjin watched Jisung shut the side door to the backseat. "Good luck."

Jisung cut his eyes towards him. The collar of his black denim jacket had been halfway turned up, almost hiding his scowl. "Won't need it."

When the car pulled away, Hyunjin didn't even get to watch the dust kicked up under the tires fade- Minho was already dragging him back inside. "We've got to hold down our end of the fort."

The djinn burst in and out of room 30 with what looked to be a relic salvaged before World War 11 hit- a 30's Philco radio he set on the coffee table and hooked up with three copper-iridescent wires to what could have been a chunk of electric ice had it not glowed to life the minute Minho stuck the cords inside of it; even the speaker grilles flared through with the light. "Everybody hear me?"

A garbling rush of static and clipped voices. Then, out from the point of the rock, a projection of three separate points of view flickered into view: a right side driver seat and a left side passenger sandwiching a backseat view on a dirt path, trundling past rolling evergreens. "Loud and clear," Chan replied, cleaner than any intercom could have managed.

"How far away are you?"

"We're just clearing town limits," Jisung told him. It couldn't have been more than five minutes.

"And how fast can you get there?" asked Hyunjin.

"All in good time, Jin," Changbin assured him. "We'll let you in on every detail once we're there."

While the dream team chattered on throughout their drive, Hyunjin and Minho talked back with bowls of proper stakeout popcorn on the couch, sneaking some to Berry and Minho's unholy trinity of familiars.

"So let me get this straight," Changbin started again. "Kkami isn't a homeless bum, but a *dog*?"

"Yes, and he's been following me around ever since I got here!" complained Hyunjin. The rest of the gang cracked up. "It's not funny!"

"Is that why you're always slamming the door behind you?" asked Chan.

"I'm not slamming any *doors*. And no, I'm not scared of him, just. Mildly, resignedly annoyed."

"And here you've been blaming all your troubles on me," sniped Jisung. "What's he been doing?"

"Just sniffing after my feet, trying to follow me into places. He's got the most weird way of begging- he doesn't whine, doesn't sit and stare up at me. The little shit plops down and growls until I give up and give him something. And one time- I swear. He *peed* on my *shoe*. What miserable dickhead did I possess in a past life to deserve this?"

"It wasn't an act of disrespect- he was claiming you," Minho said, chuckling as he batted away a disagreeing kernel of popcorn. "Sounds like it's meant to be."

They watched the sun dim to dusk through a grainy blue-tinged screen when the SUV rolled to a stop just a few paces from a ditch off the side of the road, in it a steel door bordered with a concrete

wall. After checking the perimeter for any dingy trucks or Chevy Impalas ("It's a hunter thing," explained Chan), they crept down the stairs that lead up to the door, shone a flashlight on the sigil that had been carved into it.

"Devil's trap," Minho translated. "Looks like they were expecting you, Changbin."

Above the lacrima, Jisung's giggle cut off with a punch and a gruff, 'quiet.' "But not me," said Chan. "Come on, boys. We won't be needing the door."

"Be careful with the lacrimas!" Minho yelled, and the screen fizzled black. "*Idiots.*"

When it came back to life, it overlooked a museum's worth of every hunter's dream find lit up in bar-dim lamplight: skulls twisted into every size and species mounted on the brick walls, joined with spray-painted protection sigils and variations of the American flag for extra decoration. Rows of library aisles filled with books and folders and who knew what else. Under a wooden table cluttered with papers, the gaping skin of a griffin had taken the place of a rug. Stone pillars lined with posters of Lynyrd Skynyrd and ripped-out biker magazine pages held up the ceiling. Reared back as a frozen centerpiece was a taxidermy unicorn wearing a beer helmet complete with two PBR tallboys.

"Jesus *wept*," Changbin muttered. Whether it was out of amazement or horror was yet to be parsed.

"Welp." Chan clapped his hands. "Guess we'll have an excuse to trash a place up on purpose."

"Let's make this quick- in and out," said Minho, picking up order once again. "Take only what we need. Hyunjin, help guide them. You have your references, right?"

Chan held up a Jinyoung portrait to his lacrima. Changbin did the same with his Yeji sketch. "Permission to speak, Minho?" Jisung chimed in.

The djinn's face twitched; he may have been resisting an eye roll. "What is it, Jisung."

"Will vandalism be allowed?"

At Minho's feet, the unholy trinity conferred. After a moment of deliberation, Soonie meowed. "Permission granted."

3Racha ventured into the glorified crypt, Jisung's hand lingering on the mounted skull of a jackalope in a mournful farewell, Changbin on Chan's cam taking a running leap off an office chair to tear down a Don't Tread On Me flag, Chan himself turning an iron cross upside down. As they picked the place apart, they took as much value in their vandalism task as they did in their discovery one.

"Now this is just *insulting*," Jisung scoffed, flipping through one of many mythology books to find a drawn caricature of what a spriggan supposedly looked like: a tall, wizened old man, seemingly made from the roots of a tree. "I don't look like *that*!"

"The wrinkles have been coming in a little late," Hyunjin noted, Minho stifling a laugh through his popcorn.

"Are these real angel wings?" Changbin marveled one of the pieces on the wall, reaching to touch a feather. "Nope, wait- false alarm. Tag's still on it. Might be a Halloween costume."

"Quit goofing around, you two- over here," Chan called. His lacrima view had filled with the library shelves, having finally counted them down. "I've figured out the order of them- it's categorized by element. The big four, aka earth, water, fire, and air are up front, then light and darkness, then the more miscellaneous ones down the line." He pointed down the left at what was labeled #4, "we'll be able to find more on aquatic monsters. And if it's anything good, we'll be able to

find something on Hyunjin's siblings. That's our objective. You with me?"

"Always are," BinSung droned plantaively.

"Good. Hyunjin, lead the way."

Hyunjin liked to think he tried his best- working with three guys who had wildly different methods of getting shit done was not an easy thing to accomplish. But still somewhat entertaining, given the guys they were.

"Dude." Jisung picked a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's off one of the shelves. "*Redneck* booze." He turned to Changbin, a look of way too much excitement on his face. "How much would you pay me if I drank this?"

"A nickel cut in half with Chan's fangs."

"I object to that," Chan said, flipping mindlessly through another file.

"Is this what having siblings was like?" Minho asked Hyunjin.

"Honestly," Hyunjin watched Jisung, free of bribe, shotgun the whole bottle of Jack Daniel's in Changbin's shaky lacrima point of view; behind it, he was cackling. "Yeah."

"Who knows- maybe you'll be able to find them and pick up with that."

Hyunjin thought of his brother's heavensent smile, his sister's burning cold eyes, the looks on their faces the last time he'd ever seen them. "Yeah." Some sick bastard inside of him almost made him laugh. "Maybe."

"Hey, Hyunjin," said Chan. He was holding his portrait next to a picture pulled out of a manila folder in the sixth shelf just above the ground. "I might be wrong, but. This look familiar to you?"

And suddenly Hyunjin couldn't have laughed if he tried.

The picture wasn't like any of the ones he found. He didn't have to blink or scrub his eyes or scan the photo for the details that had been imprinted into his memory. They were all there: the curve of his jaw and relentless swoop of his hair and darkness of his eyes focused on some point in the distance. A man in a sepia-soaked oasis, surrounded by water oaks and tall grass and stalks of irises, searching for a sliver of reality.

Minho didn't say a word when Hyunjin rose slowly, shakily to his feet, lifted a hand to touch the picture in Chan's point of view, grazed nothing but pixels. It felt like the whole world was tilting off kilter. "That's him," he heard himself whisper. "That's Jinyoung."

Both Jisung and Changbin had come to peek over Chan's shoulder. The demon whistled low. "Damn," he murmured. "Your brother's a babe."

Jisung's point of view shifted to stare at him. "You're going to hell."

A sigh. "I know."

"Again."

"I know."

"Obvious aside," Minho intercepted, "where did you find it? Was there a date on the picture?"

"Not the picture, but the file." Chan pointed to the aisle he'd dug the file out of. "The entire section was dated '83."

"He went missing in 1975." That meant Hyunjin had been right all along.

"Keep looking for anything before then," Minho instructed.

"Changbin, Jisung- search the '85 column for something recent. See if anything else lines up."

Shoving each other out of the way, the two dove for the bottom shelf, practically lying on the floor, ripping out files by the dozen, flipping through the leaflets throwing files over their shoulders when nothing was found.

Then Changbin, that son of one blessed bitch, cried out, "Jackpot!"

"*Damn*," Jisung cursed, smacking his file down.

"What'd you find?" Hyunjin asked hurriedly. *Come on- keep the expectations low. You already found one. It'd be craziness if you found the other too.*

But apparently Changbin really wanted to atone for calling his older brother a babe, because he held up his portrait next to the photo of Yeji retreating behind a cover of a red mable- a faraway picture all the same, yet still the same constant motion, same voltaic energy about her, a doe on the move. Taken in '85. Hyunjin had never been so close to tears. "That's Yeji," he croaked out, sorrily. "My sister."

If it weren't for Minhø's steady hand around his shoulders, Hyunjin might have buckled right over lacrima radio. "Pack your files and portraits," said Minhø. "We may just have what we need."

And just because it felt like things were finally going right, everything went wrong.

The hunters kicked through the door to a blast of country music, jolting Changbin so hard he dropped his file.

"Shit," Jisung hissed.

The music halted when a dour voice, rough and cold and farm-forged, growled out, "Wait."

A button clicked- was someone carrying a *boombox*? "What is it, Cam?" asked its partner, an equally tough whiskey-warm drawl.

The sound of piglike snuffling came through. The frown on Jisung's face couldn't have been more disgusted with the mortals of his world. "Monsters, Gene," he replied gravely, with the ominous click of a shotgun. "And *demons*."

Two pairs of steel toed boots jumped down over the railing of the stairs. All was quiet but the rhythmic *tap* of a heel-toe step on concrete, a hunter's tread.

"Starting to feel a little unsafe here," whispered Changbin. For the first time since Hyunjin had met him, there was actual nervousness in his voice.

"Take what you have," Minho told him, in the urgent, half-buried tone of a man who knew he was speaking on borrowed time. "Get out of there. *Now*."

Deliberately slow, they climbed to their feet, hugging the files and photos to their chests. They were just about to start their tiptoe out of the aisle, dip out through the nearest shadow they could find when three things happened in rapid succession.

One: A lightbulb flickered above their heads.

Two: The drained Jack Daniel's Jisung had balanced precariously on a stuffed bookshelf in his haste to start his own search gave in to the pull of gravity and smashed into the ground.

Three: Cam and Gene Worcester took off straight for the water section.

"Go!" Minho yelled.

Racha broke into a run, and the whole library went hazy. Even the magic of the lacrimas couldn't have kept their cameras still- not when they were trying to keep up with the speed of panic and breathless swears as Cam, a hulking, shaggy redhead wearing denim on blue denim, jumped onto their trail with, "I got you *now*, underworld scum."

Jisung turned around for only a moment, whiplashing a reckless root out of a black denim sleeve to knock the shotgun out of Cam's hands, when Changbin pulled him back on track by the front of his shirt. "Come on!"

There wasn't a single clear point of view to follow- every lacrima shot was like looking out of a shaking snow globe. The sound of footsteps was mixed with the sound of banging buckshot and that might have been Chan who threw the chair as a diversion but Gene had just gotten ahold of that scimitar mounted on the wall under the angel wings, so who was to say anybody was winning?

Chan and Jisung's screens buzzed black- a sure sign they had found a shadow to jump into -but Changbin's was the same out-of-focus pandemonium.

"Min-" Changbin's voice came through, cluttered and nearly dissociated with static.

"What?" Minho lunged forward, hands on the coffee table. "What is it, Changbin?"

"Shit, did you miss the jump?" asked Hyunjin.

His voice cut out again, skipped through what might have been 'help' when the view from his lacrima became horribly clear: Changbin, all alone, turning every which way for a familiar someone. "Guys?"

"Bin!" Chan yelled. He could have been all the way across the room now.

Gene stepped into view out of aisle four, the blade of his sword glitching wickedly clear. "Time to go back to hell."

A glitch in the screen- it might've been Changbin catching his breath -and Gene swung his sword and rushed forward. The deadly slice of a blade, and Changbin's point of view cut out all together.

“Damn it,” Minho seethed, twisting the knobs on the radio, shaking the lacrima. “No!”

Chan and Jisung changed direction, heading for their lost friend, when Cam, dead in the middle of room, just as ugly as his brother, tossed his head back and yelled, “Fire in the hole!”

And he fired the bazooka in his hands right at them.

Both cameras were blown back, sent rocketing into aisles, knocking down rows like dominos before crashing into a stone pillar, Chan’s lacrima nothing but a vision of blue haze.

When Jisung’s came back into view, it was positioned shakily over Chan’s dazed form, trying to help it up. There was debris on his shirt, in his hair. Blood was beginning to trickle down his forehead. “Chan. Chan. Look at me. Come on, are you okay?”

“Changbin...”

“He’s okay. He’s fighting for us right now. He needs our help. We-We have to go help him.”

Chan tried to push off the ruined bookcase; it already seemed as if he were somewhat dreaming. “Where’s Minho?”

“Minho- he didn’t come with us. He’s at Levanter, remember?”
Jisung’s voice wavered like a flea on an acrobat wire, fighting to stay on top. “He’s waiting for you, man. You have to get up. You gotta go home to him.”

Minho watched Chan nod, bare inches from the lacrima view, stunned on his knees, gripping the rim of the coffee table, holding his breath like he was trying to stifle the air. Had he been able to blink, much less move, Hyunjin might have looked away as not to see the tears budding in his eyes.

“Come on. Let’s get you up.” Jisung’s hands grabbed Chan’s arms, tried to pull him up. “Let’s go.”

A mortal scream of Southern terror, and Jisung turned in time to see Gene sent flying into the other wall, a shadowy bruise from a punch still withering into his stomach through his clothes. Changbin ran in a second after, clambering over the wreckage to get to Chan.

Jisung staggered to his feet. Beneath his feet, the bookcase rumbled. An explosion of green- roots spilling in a deluge from every direction -and his lacrima feed cut out too.

The night was silent as death. Minho hadn’t moved for a full minute. His three cats were trying unsuccessfully to crawl onto his lap.

Hyunjin sat down next to him, as close as he dared, close enough to see the emptiness in his face. “They’re gonna be okay. Come on. They’ve dealt with worse before, right?”

Minho’s arms came up around Doongie, held her tight. “I never know for sure,” he confessed quietly, staring into the wood grain swirls on the coffee table. “Either they come back or they don’t.”

Hyunjin had only been at Levanter for a week. He didn’t know these guys very well, didn’t know about what they’d been through together. But he did know what it was like to love, to look at the door and wonder when they would walk through. He knew enough of that.

He draped an arm around Minho’s shoulders, just as he had done for him. As he followed the pattern of the wood grain with his own eyes, he started to sing.

“And even though we ain’t got money, I’m so in love with you honey,”

Minho sniffed, loosening his grip on Doongie, letting the rest of his trinity in as well. *“And everything will bring a chain of love,”*

"And in the morning, when I rise, you bring a tear of joy to my eyes, and tell me everything's gonna be alright,"

It was a half hour later when the doorbell rang.

Minho, who'd been pacing the courtyard for a better part of thirty minutes, ran straight for the lobby. Even from the couch, Hyunjin could hear his groan of relief. "Took you fucking long enough."

"Sorry, Min," laughed Jisung weakly. "Traffic was murder."

A door slammed, and the dream team was shuffled back inside. All three of them were dusty and battle-worn, but alive. "What happened to you guys?"

"Sungie exploded the earth again, I knocked out a couple of hillbilly twins, and Chan got our files. The usual," Changbin summed up. "Lesson learned." He gave him a bruised thumbs-up. "Vandalism."

Hyunjin couldn't really argue with that. "Vandalism works."

"The lacrima feed cut out halfway through," Minho rounded on them. "Last we saw, the whole building was collapsing on you."

"Not the whole building- just a bit of the ceiling." Chan's dimples twinkled next to his smile; they'd probably escaped dozens of falling ceilings. "We're alright now." But they faded as another shaky sniff betrayed Minho's anger, dropped into pillowy concern. "What's wrong?" Minho walked wordlessly into his embrace, vined his arms around his waist. "Hey, hey, it's alright. We're home now. We're okay." Chan closed his arms around his shoulders, let him drop his head into his collar, spoke into his nape. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

The remaining three stepped back, giving them their deserved amount of space. "We tried to get more together," Changbin told

Hyunjin. "There was a lot under those bookcases. A few notebook clippings that went with the pictures, but that was it."

"You've already done enough," Hyunjin promised him.

Minho pulled away from Chan- eyes red, expression professionally pissed. "Alright. Who was stupid this time?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to take the credit this time," said Jisung, raising his hand. "Yes, the wall exploding was my doing, but it was more than that."

"What more could you have possibly done?"

Jisung bit his lip. "Well..." Instead of Minho, he turned to Hyunjin and reached into his jacket. "I didn't know if they'd be anything, but I dug around for a while to find them." They were two VHS tapes, labeled *Ice Twins Sightings 1 & 2*. "Turns out our Worcester buddies had a little AV collection."

"*That's* why you held us back for twenty minutes?" Changbin accused.

"I thought it'd be worth a shot!" Hyunjin accepted the tapes with the files, putting two and two together like dug-up treasure. "So, uh. Anyways. I didn't catch a date, or location, or any big details, but. With everything you've been doing, I figured, y'know, that it'd be a good idea-"

Hyunjin didn't let him finish his sentence; he was already pulling him into a bone snapping hug, files and tapes tumbling to the floor, laughing bizarre, giddy, overjoyed laughter into his stupid black denim collar. Jisung was chuckling unsteadily along with it, stiff as a board, no closer to understanding him than he'd been the day he saw him in the clearing. "Which I guess it was? That's good to know, I mean, thank you would've worked fine, but-"

Hyunjin pressed a word-stealing kiss to his cheek, rooting Jisung dumbly to the spot with the smile he hadn't gotten to see in the courtyard before, the sun shining on a summer blue sea. *"Thank you."*

Scooping up the files and tapes off the ground, he ran out of the courtyard, up the stairs, and into his room without so much as a backwards look.

Jisung watched room 25's door slam; he wasn't able to do much else. When he turned around, the rest of his coven waiting with knowing smirks.

"Worth the trouble?" asked Chan.

"Shut up."

"Now *this* is a refreshing change of pace," Changbin declared.

"I didn't *know* he would get that excited!"

"You can touch your cheek, we won't judge," Minho assured him.

"Pipe down!" Just his own smile was spreading, something like spring lilacs* bubbling in his chest, it was stamped out. "He's gonna leave now, isn't he?"

The realization seemed to hit for them too, the same solid punch. "Now that he's got no reason to stay, yeah," said Changbin.

Whatever happiness Jisung had felt moments before crumpled up, kicked like a paper ball to the curb. Chan saw it instantly. "Come on, Sung, you know what we told you about getting attached-"

"I know that!" The vampire winced back. "I- I know, I just... I finally got to him, and now..." *Now it's all for nothing.* "It's fine. It's nothing, it's fine, just."

He shook his head, ditched the sentence and stormed off, slamming his own door, crushing the lilacs where they grew.

"I know, Berry, I know."

"Arf!"

"I don't want you to pee on the rug either."

"Arruff!"

"Okay, okay."

As much value as Chan was learning to put in a night's sleep, he wasn't going to risk ignoring his dog's needs. At least it wasn't sleepwalking in the middle of the night.

She wove around his ankles, egging him on. "I'm moving, jeez. How are you this active so late? Do I rub off on you that much?"

As she barked out something that might have been 'yes,' he saw a sliver of light slicing through the darkness, streaming from the open crack in the door to room 25. "Might have to get back to you on that."

Dropping Berry off in the courtyard, he traveled up to the shadow the door made. "Hyunjin?" No answer, no footsteps- not even when Chan poked his head through.

Illuminated by light of the TV, the siren sat hunkered at the foot of his bed, surrounded by a chaotic spread of papers- every file he'd collected and then some. His eyes were half-glazed and bleary, almost as red as his hair. He could have been sitting there for hours. "You okay?"

"Look at them." When Chan didn't move, he waved a hand at the pictures around him. "Just look."

Cautiously, Chan stepped into the crypt, peered at the black and white images spread on the floor, the new that had joined the old. The guy and girl from the portraits but in landscapes, fully real.

In one, Hyunjin's brother was throwing a flip flop at some guy diving into ocean waves. Mixed in with those were photos of his sister: one had her taking a blue-haired bob by the hand into soft-blowing reeds. In every picture, both siblings were smiling.

Frozen on the TV screen was Jinyoung on the shore of a beach arms around the neck of a handsome mulleted stranger, beaming in black and white, a love story in a noir film shot.

"All this time," Hyunjin murmured, hoarsely, softly, "I just assumed we were all looking for each other. Or at least died trying. I never doubted it for a second." His hand, made skeletally pale with the light, reached out the graze the glass. "I always just thought we were separated by some kind of disaster." His fingers slid down the screen, rested as if he wanted them to burn there. "Maybe the real reason they left was to get away from me."

Chan could only watch him, watch the life drain out of him and soak into the carpets, bleed the threads colorless. Everything he'd been fighting for had just crumbled before him in a matter of minutes; what else could he do? What else could Chan say, but:

"Come on."

He clicked off the TV. Hyunjin blinked at the sudden absence. In nothing but the dark, the blue of his eyes shone confusion. "Let's get out of here. I'm not gonna let you wallow in this."

"And why can't I?"

"Because there's somewhere I wanna take you."

Since neither had anything better to do, it took only two minutes to throw on a couple jackets from the coatrack, steal three amplifier

glyphs from Minho's sorcery room, and shadow travel them out of Levanter- a glimpse of oblivion, and then back out into the night.

Hyunjin stumbled dizzily out of the rift, grabbing onto the nearest rock for support: a strange flat, cylinderesque- "*Shit.*"

He jumped off of the headstone, sending a silent apology to Erica Rosenberg. "Chan? Where are we?"

Chan was already walking ahead; pale, cloaked in black, curled in mist, he looked strangely in-place among the files of gravestones. "Evergreen Cemetery, LA," he answered. "Don't worry, it's not haunted. Mostly. Just try to keep up."

He walked on, occasionally checking over his shoulder to make sure Hyunjin didn't trip, because of course Evergreen was one of those old, historical 1880's cemeteries that had all the bodies that had ever hit the floor *in* the floor, meaning you either stepped on or bumped into their gravestones and hoped that their ghosts were content enough with the lives they had lived not to get you for it.

Chan stopped in front of two plain, simple slabs of stone, his gaze a caress over the names. "Daniel Bang, 1886 to 1974. Lorraine Bang, 1884 to 1974," he recited when he heard Hyunjin approach. "High school sweethearts, died on the same day."

"Cool story," Hyunjin panted. "Did you know them?"

The corner of Chan's mouth lifted in a fond smile. "They were my mom and dad."

Hyunjin choked on the next breath he took. "*Oh.*" Chan chuckled good-naturedly. "I'm- I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. You didn't know." He looked back at his parents' graves. "I didn't know either, when they died. I'd been in Eldritch when I got the call- an old friend of mine, Minjun, had been in town. They'd moved to another side, a better side, where they could grow old and retire in

the place that had their back. Said the nurse they'd hired to help around came and found them in their bed, just... gone. I almost didn't go to the funeral, but Minh and Jamie insisted. I stayed up in the trees, watched my siblings read their requiems like some kind of creeper. When I did actually come down here, stand and look it face to face, I didn't know what to do. What could I do? There was so much I'd missed, so much *they'd* missed. There was no way I could tell them about any of it now."

"But." Chan stooped down and picked up one of two complex papers swan from one of the graves, made of what might have been a torn Bible page. Out of the other, a purple chrysanthemum from one of two bouquets. "If my sister could stop by with a new origami piece, and my brother could drop off fresh flowers every week, I figured I could do something too."

"So, I wrote letters. About the things that had happened- not everything, of course, but the things that were important. The places I'd been, the beings I'd met, the life I'd made out in Eldritch. It wasn't what I'd planned, not at all, but I loved it, every minute, and it was what I'd wanted to tell them since the day we'd had to leave each other behind. I'd read them aloud, empty it all out of my system, and when I ran out of big things, I sent them little ones- songs, poetry, random nothings I'd overheard on the street or in the motel. I still try to do it every couple of months, whenever I can get out on my own time." In the chiseled slate, Hyunjin could see him bidding farewell once more to the people he'd known in life. "I knew I'd never get to make up the years I'd lost with them, the years we'd had to cut short, but I knew even if they'd missed me, they'd let themselves be happy, and so had I."

When he looked at Hyunjin, the brown in his eyes was sad, but not somber. "I'm not saying you're not allowed to miss them- you can miss them every day, in a million different ways. You can wonder what they're doing, see them in your dreams, and wish with all your heart that they were there with you, because that's just part of the whole thing. But you can do all that and know for a fact that while

they still live and breathe, they're missing you too. They're thinking of you, loving you, and living for you, because they are your *family*. They're running around and smiling in those pictures, in those tapes, because they know you would hate the everloving shit out of them if they just wasted their days away in the dark, mourning over the loss of you, and I know you can't look me in the eye right this second and deny it." In spite of himself, in spite of everything, Hyunjin laughed, bounced his eyes to the damp, green grass below his sneakers. "You can miss them all you want, but you can't ever doubt that."

Chan pulled a hand out of his pocket- in it, he held Hyunjin's room key. "Now, I'm not going to tell you how to live your life- only you can decide how to do that. But I can say that there's a lot of it to live, and a lot of ways to live it, and if getting the first ticket out of Eldritch is how you want to start it, then I'll help you pack your bags. But, if you plan on sticking around, well." The corner of his mouth pulled up. "I can arrange that as well."

"I think..." Hyunjin swallowed a breath full of night chill. "I think I've got some unfinished business to settle before anything else."

The first thing Hyunjin did when he walked into any room was listen to the sounds in it, read what songs he could hear in the air, feel in the energy. Even when he first set foot in the lobby, breathed in the fresh April air of the courtyard, he could tell Levanter was full of music- there was humming in every corner, a smooth, steady tempo that soothed and brought in the life through its doors.

In a space like Jisung's garden, the feel of it was almost tangible, like waving his fingers through a cloud. The flowers seemed to thrive in it, stretched the stems of their necks out towards it, bloomed as though it were sunlight. A home inside of a home, a place where life was cultivated, cherished and protected for all that it meant, existing to thrive and be beautiful. *Doesn't everyone want somewhere to remind them of the first place they loved?*

Kneeling before the white flower centerpiece, he gave in to the first song he heard in the silence: acoustic guitar in the early mornings, a single voice in a sleepy starlight town, a light left on in the dark.

"Looking out, across the nighttime,"*

"The city winks a sleepless eye,"

"Hear his voice shake my windows,"

"Sweet seducing sighs,"

The sliding glass door opened, just like it did every witching hour, when Jisung went out to check on his moonflowers. Instead of the familiar undercurrent of chittering animals, he heard the voice that had drawn him so softly into a clearing, weaving around, *"Get me out into the nighttime,"* strained to hear, *"Four walls won't hold me tonight,"*

When he realized who was in his garden, Jisung's face had already split into a grin. "Hold it," he whispered, and ran back inside for his guitar.

Hyunjin's eyes were closed, blissfully, as if in prayer, as he sang, *"If they say why, why, tell them that it's human nature,"*

"Why, why, does he do me that way?"

Because his eyes were closed, he couldn't see the fireflies that had slipped through the cracks of the strangler figs dancing above his head, bathing every leaf and petal in their odd neon glow, couldn't see the primroses and lilies and sweet gardenias bending towards him, aching to drink in every lyric, even the tulips waking up to listen in.

He couldn't even hear the dulcet guitar chords until they were right there in the entrance.

"Reaching out," Jisung took over, Hyunjin's eyes snapping open on him, *"to touch a stranger,"* laughing through their harmony of, *"Electric eyes are everywhere,"*

"See that boy," the spriggan sat down beside him, not taking his eyes away or his fingers off the frets for a second. *"He knows I'm watching."* Hyunjin bit down a poorly hid smile when he sang, *"He likes the way I stare,"*

As they dipped into the chorus, their voices blended together.

"If they say why, why, tell them that it's human nature,"

"Why, oh, why, does he do me that way?"

Though Hyunjin's eyes were open for the miracles he was causing, and Jisung had hardly ever let anyone in his garden for this long, for the life of them, nobody could look anywhere but the eyes they had glared into, stared into, done everything in their power to stay away from, perhaps avoiding this.

"If they say why, why, them that it's human nature,"

"Why, oh, why, does he do me that way?"

"I like living this way," Hyunjin sang, to the rhythm of the guitar.

"I like loving this way," Jisung intoned, following him into the bridge.

To the tune of a spriggan's melody, with the words of a siren's lullaby, it was as though the whole forest fell under their spell: the wind blew in a tender breeze, gentle, as not to stir any of the flowers or disturb the fireflies. The leaves of evergreens rustled as if trying to put in their own theme, clumsily, but sublimely so. The whole town could have been listening- their voices sounded so loud and so quiet at the same time -but they stayed tucked into their beds, breathing slow, cadenced breaths, shuttering themselves inside their dreams, leaving this moment to the two of them.

"*Why, why,*" Hyunjin hummed, faintly brushing his knuckles across the silk of a moonflower, Jisung watching his movements, though not out of wariness. "*Tell them that it's human nature,*"

"*Why...*"

The spell lifted, and the flowers eased back into their slumber, but the two monsters remained exactly as they were.

"I don't usually do duets," Hyunjin whispered.

"I didn't see how I could stay away." Quickly, Jisung cleared his throat, added, "I mean, I had to check on the moonflowers too, so."

"I knew." Jisung's eyebrows raised, smirk meter hit Peak Dumbass. "Don't you start-"

"Who's spying on *who*, now?"

"I can still drown you here."

"In a haven of my own making? I wouldn't let you."

"Don't get too cocky."

Jisung rolled his eyes: *fine, fine*. "Seriously, though. The fuck're you doing here?"

"Well, I remembered our... talk, earlier today, and I realized I hadn't told you the full reason why I came here." Hyunjin nodded over the white flowers, at the pink sect by the entrance. "I'd been walking around the yard when I saw this place, found the phlox on the side. Back home, on the island, I swear. It grew everywhere. I couldn't go to one corner without finding it sprouting in the sand. Seeing it here, I don't know. Just felt like a piece of that."

"You don't have to explain yourself. I get it." A glance of hesitation through cobalt blue strands of hair. "It sounds beautiful. Your island."

"It was." So beautiful- even when the sun wouldn't come out. "Bet yours was too."

"Once, yeah. But I've learned to make do with what I've got here." Judging from the fondness in his voice, it hadn't been too hard. "Still. I know I wasn't the friendliest either. I don't have an excuse for that."

"I suppose neither of us do." It didn't mean they couldn't pick up the pieces. "But, maybe with a new understanding and mutual respect," Jisung tipped his hand to a scale of *maybe*. "We could move past it?"

"I can fuck with that." Another side-eye. "As long as you don't think I'm going to stop singing to my birds."

"Didn't count on it."

"Or change up my flannels."

"You own nothing else anyways."

"Or close up my hospice."

"Hope you know how to self-treat the plague."

"Guess we'll just have to agree to disagree," laughed Jisung. It was deeper than Hyunjin had thought, surprisingly sonorous. "Out of courtesy, I'll give you one night of peace before you head out."

Actually... "I was thinking I'd stay a little longer. See what else I can learn here. Maybe give Kkami a chance."

"Really?" Jisung's eyes had gone wide and shocked as quarters. "Wow. Nevermind then."

"Did you just *redact* your politeness offer?"

"If you're gonna be sticking around here, you can get used to me." A glittering firefly wink. "I'll try not to make it too easy."

Hyunjin could imagine the three hours of sleep he was going to get that night, waking up to a silver morning sky, holding the pillow over his ear as a new folk song played through the walls.

He decided he'd be up for the new start. "I would be insulted if you did."

broken - lovelytheband

*Danny's Song - Loggins and Messina

*Human Nature - Glee Cast

*Calla lily: Resurrection, rebirth

*Nasturtium: Victory in battle

*Phlox: Harmony, united hearts/souls

*Gloxinia: Love at first sight

*White poppy: Peace, end of war

*Lilac: Joy of youth

A Contracorriente

Chapter 19: A Contracorriente

Back to the present with the road trip gang, we've skipped on down to a new location, where troubles come in the form of new enemies and new allies.

Strap in, boys. We're gonna be having some... Turbulence here.

A contracorriente

Y aunque caiga la tormenta,

Yo nunca pierdo la fuerza,

Este es mi lugar

Persiguiendo al sol...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Holly Beach, Louisiana - Present

There wasn't a lot of room for wild nights on a road trip, but if anything had happened yesterday that got them here, Jisung didn't remember.

He woke up to Jeongin's hair smelling like Cajun fries, which he could only tell because his entire nose was buried in it. He would have pulled away, but the kid had some kind of freaky death grip on his arm, currently white-knuckling through REMs. Seungmin was fetus-curved around a Popeyes box, which churned up a hazy memory of Chan pulling up to the drive-thru, soberly ordering five

separate biscuit boxes, followed by Felix and Hyunjin screaming their way through Whipped Into Shape.*

As far as Jisung can tell, it made for a good time.

After celebrating the timely demise of Kai's empire, as well as Kai himself at Hell In Heaven, the gang packed their things, bid farewell to Twice, and moved on down the southeast point of their compass.

"What's the rush?" Seungmin had asked. "It's not like the edge of the world is going anywhere."

"In some cases, I've heard it actually has," Chan replied. "I don't know if that's actually true, but I'd hate to find out."

Jisung couldn't see a lot of the front seat, but he could hear Changbin's freight train snoring mixed with the tinny hype playlist, which had tragically been disconnected from the AUX cord. The windows shimmered with a bubble-like glamour; apparently, Minho had been confident enough in his magic abilities to put the car on autopilot, giving Chan the rare opportunity to sleep for once, as the car trundled on.

Out the window, he could see where it had taken them: a forest of rolling green, close to the coast, going by the smell filtering in through the crack. Oak trees and briny ocean air blew by like it was all the same scene spinning on a wheel, leading them along the dirt path that lead to a solemn sky hued the kind of gray that only came before a storm.

It should have been the first hint that something was wrong.

Honestly, it took Jisung a lot longer than it should have- for a second, he considered going right back to sleep. The car was rocking as it moved, ever so gently, little swoops and dips that came naturally as potholes and pebbles under tires. It would've been as easy as closing his eyes.

But then the trees started slowing in their cycle, enough for him to catch a flash of a face in the bark.

Jisung lunged for the window immediately. No, that wasn't just his own face, that was someone else's mischief, glimpses of impish smiles that were there and then gone, replicated in the next tree over. They were waiting for him, watching him, *teasing* him.

And as the car gave another soft lurch, he knew why.

Down below the trees, below the trunks and tree husk faces, the ground was rumbling, the way he had made it so many times. But this wasn't Jisung's doing; the roots he'd mistaken for rocks and potholes weren't edging them ahead, they were wrapping around their wheels and pulling them under, inch by inch, a mouse in a cobra's embrace, into the melting quicksand ground.

They'd let themselves be rocked to sleep by a forest of death. Within minutes, they were going to be submerged.

"Jeongin," Jisung murmured, shaking the gumihō by the shoulder.
"*Jeongin.*"

"No," Jeongin grunted.

"Wake *up*. You're squeezing the piss out of me."

"Sounds like a you problem." And then, as if their morning couldn't get any more fucked, the playlist segued into the intro of Uptown Funk.*

Jisung whipped around. Of course- of *fucking* course -they were all still asleep. *Which means it's up to me to save the day.*

He unbuckled his seatbelt, ignoring Jeongin's groans of protest as he threw himself over the front passenger seat. Jisung felt past Changbin's shoulder, Felix's immaculately shaped nose (those angel genetics never quit), and a chicken sandwich wrapper until closing

around his wrist as the guitar joined in, hand still gripping his phone. "God *damn* it, Lix." It was like they were already practicing for their bones to lock in death. Not if Jisung could help it.

He pried his fingers off one by one, dropping it into his lap. Bending over to grab the AUX cord off of Changbin's lap, he plugged it into the phone, tossed *that* over this shoulder, and flicked a vine out of his wrist at the volume knob, turning it all the way up in one swift motion.

The first verse was enough to resuscitate the whole crew.

"-THIS HIT, THAT ICE COLD - "

"What the *fuck*?" spluttered Minho.

"Hi. We have to go," Jisung informed him.

"So early?" asked Hyunjin blearily.

Seungmin dropped his face into the Popeyes box like a sleep mask. "Ugghhh."

"Who do we have to beat the shit out of this time?" Changbin was still too unconscious to properly do so, but the enthusiasm was there.

"I'm pretty sure beating the shit out of an entire forest would be ecoterrorism and impossible," replied Jisung, "so in the meantime, good morning and you're welcome."

Chan, who'd only been half asleep anyways, already had his hands on the wheel. "What're we up against this time, Sung?"

"From what it looks like, a group of some pretty twisted Southern dryads. Maybe a couple spriggans too, but not the me kind."

"Is the ground trying to eat us?" Felix mused, peering out the window. "That's lit."

"Evil ground, Felix. Evil ground."

"Aw."

"Can I just go back to sleep?" asked Seungmin. "Is that an option for me right now?"

Jisung whirled on him. "Do you want to *die*, Seungmin? Are you really open to that idea right now?" Seungmin could have possibly cared less had they thrown him out the rear window. "Chan? How fast can you get us out?"

"We don't have nearly enough gas for anything faster than this," Chan reported. "We used up enough getting through Oklahoma."

Jisung switched onto Minho. "You got anything that could help us out?"

Minho punched open the glove compartment, rooted through his glyph collection. "Just enough amplifiers to shake those roots. I can't predict the exact effect it'll have, but it'll be enough to get us out of here."

"Jisung?" Hyunjin called. He'd edged away from his window, from the swamp vine that had begun to slither inside. "Normal coastal plants don't do this, do they?"

All around them, other vines had started thrashing about, latching over the roof, trying to do the same. "We'll take it."

Murmuring a disenchantment, Minho broke the spell, erasing the rose colored tint on the windows and slapping the amplifier glyphs on the dashboard in its place. The engine rumbled louder with every addition, wheels growling with effort as they fought to push out of their prisons.

"I'm starting to see how death is going to factor into this!" yelled Jeongin as he tore away from the barrage of vines slapping against

the rear window.

Minho exhaled. "Well, guys, looks like we're going down for the earlier round."

"Please tell me we're going down swinging," said Changbin hopefully.

Chan squeezed his hand. "I'll be your number one with the bullet."

The djinn swallowed. "A loaded God complex, cock it and pull it."

He slapped the final glyph on the center console, and Chan slammed on the gas and jerked the wheel hard to the right.

Anyone watching from above would have seen a black SUV charging wheels-off-ground out of the trees, off a blunt, sandy cliff, and over the edge.

The landing was much less elegant.

Given the cliff they jumped was short, rocky, and had a slope that practically served as a half manmade emergency escape hatch, it made for a bumpy ride all the way down from the arrival to the impact, as if the car was a snowball rolling downhill, jostling through momentum at a forty-five degree angle.

When it finally plunked into the bank of a gratefully sandy shore, the force was enough to jerk them all forward, leaving everybody held just barely back by their seatbelts.

"Minho," Chan breathed out. "Never use that CPU spell again."

Minho swallowed. "Got it."

Jisung and Chan had the options of an easy out- shadow travel and root-slinging -but for the others, it was a little messier.

Minho managed to slide out mostly upright with Hyunjin and helped ease out a rattled Felix, who refused to jump any other way unless it was into his arms. Next was Changbin, who, despite his best efforts of trying to land on his on his feet, ended up slipping on a dislodged rock and going down on his ass. Seungmin proceeded to follow in his footsteps, having tripping on the sleeve of someone's discarded hoodie and starfish-planting into the sand.

"Because I wanted both sand *and* biscuit crumbs in my hair," grumbled Seungmin, plunked sulkily on a boulder.

"You and me both, kid," replied Changbin, using a comb to rake what he could out of it.

Meanwhile:

"Jeongin, you can jump!" Felix called up to him. "Nothing's gonna happen!"

But Jeongin, too stubborn and nervous to follow his instructions, took a different route. Dropping into fox form, he used the headrest of Changbin's seat to leap through the opened sunroof and onto the roof, scoping out a vantage point.

"What is he-" Hyunjin started, then stopped, watched Chan run back with his arms waving open. "Oh, Lord."

"Jump, Jeongin!" The vampire shouted. "I got you!"

"Do not listen to him, Jeongin, he does not!" Minho yelled.

But Jeongin was confident enough in the opposite to ignore the djinn completely, gear up with a running start, and launch himself off the roof of the car.

"I'm open!" Chan shouted, arms out like he was awaiting a hug from God. "I'm open, I'm op- oof!" A flash of white fur, and down he went.

Changbin showed Seungmin the photo he'd gotten of the collision through his Polaroid. "This cheer you up?"

Seungmin snatched his camera back, looked long and hard at the image of Jeongin's entire vulpine body weight getting Chan square in the face. "Yeah," he said finally. "It does."

"Attaboy." Root-slinging past them, Jisung clambered his way up the rocks like the squirrel he was so constantly compared to, his concern going well past the car. "Sungie, you alright?"

"No," Jisung muttered. "No, no, no, no, *no*."

"Well, that was a lot of no's, but- hey, where're you going?"

The boys followed him up the bluff and back to the brink of the forest, where Jisung stood at the gaping mouth of it, eyes on the huge initial formed from the fluid twisting branches weaving over the entrance: a single crooked, cursive *I*.

"Okay, I'm gonna go ahead and guess that means something," said Hyunjin, "and we're not gonna like what it is."

"I," Jisung echoed, horror in his voice, regarding the landscape before him with fear. "Irene. This is her territory." And the message was clear: *stay out*. Or enter at their own risk. "*Shit*."

If getting consumed alive by Mother Nature hadn't already brought down the mood, then that definitely did.

"If I remember correctly, and forgive me if I don't, dementia is infectious," started Seungmin. "Irene is the evil shitbird who's been sending you letters to join her nature cult, right?"

"Yup," replied Chan in a thin whisper. "That's her."

"How could she have found us all the way out here?" Jisung was pacing now, hands wrought in his fluffy hair. "What could we have done now?"

"Our cashier at Popeyes, maybe," offered Felix. "But then again, any stoned college student would've gotten that many biscuits, so maybe not."

"Or, y'know, the fact that we just took down an entire magical empire *and* the conniving warlock who owned it last week, so that might be a part of it," Minho offered. "I wouldn't be surprised if one of her lot was lumped in with Kai's supporters."

"Shit," Jisung muttered, then louder, perhaps in agreement: "*Shit!*"

"Why's she still chasing you after all these years anyway?" asked Jeongin. "I mean, I get you were the one who got away, but there's plenty of other fish in the sea."

"Wait, you weren't even in the cult itself?" Seungmin piped. Halfway through his pacing, Jisung shook his head. "Damn. That's boring."

"Because every time, he's told her no," said Changbin. "If there's anything we know about Irene, it's that she never lets go of a challenge."

"What could I even want to do with her?" Jisung ranted. "She was the one who took everything from me- *everything!*"

"And she won't do that again," Hyunjin promised, reaching his side with a hand to his shoulder, a moment of rare comfort- of understanding. "There's nothing she can do to you anymore."

Jisung faltered, wanting to give in. "But- but what if she finds a way to us?"

"She'll have to catch up first, won't she? If we get out now, we can leave it behind us."

"And go where? Our whole ride's jammed in the sand."

Murmurs of agreement. "He's pretty right there," Minho pointed out.

“Well.” Hyunjin’s mouth clamped shut, screwed up in thought. When the lightbulb went off in his head, it had taken his process to a different place entirely, cast his gaze off to the ocean. “What if we went off course?”

“Where to?” asked Changbin suspiciously.

“Somewhere Irene wouldn’t be able to get her hands on us—somewhere without roots or vines or trees for her to control.” The siren strode past them onto the rocks, face lighting up with excitement at the expanse of choppy blue laid out before them. “What if we took this trip out to sea?”

He was met back with a layout of blank stares. “Come on, she can’t very well attack while we’re underwater, can she? It’s a whole other element!”

Seungmin cleared his throat. “Well, realistically, she *could*, I mean, there’s still stuff like algae, and kelp, and coral—

”Seungmin. Let me have one good idea. *One.*”

”It is a good idea,” Chan amended, “but does it have to be the only one? We should look at other options.”

”Minho, can you still not swim?” asked Felix.

“That wouldn’t tie into this,” Minho deflected smoothly.

”Wouldn’t it?”

”Nope.”

”Well, we can’t just go drive back to Twice two states away,” Hyunjin protested. “That would take two days at best, and who knows what could happen then?”

“I also think we should consider the whole ‘territory’ thing again?” Jeongin chimed in. “Don’t know what it really entails, but I think it

means if we step on any land form with a speck of green, we'll be strangled with it."

"Thank you. See, he gets it!"

"So, we go into the water," said Seungmin. "What happens then? Where will we go?"

"We'll find a way- don't we always? All I'm saying is, yes, we started our morning getting kicked out of a forest. We don't have any allies close, or a car to make a getaway in-"

"Your pitch isn't really selling so far," said Minho dryly.

"- *but* whenever we've gone somewhere we didn't know, we've always managed to find something to give us the upper hand, with or without a backup plan. We might not like running away all the time, but it's the least we can do. And, who knows? The ocean holds all kinds of mysteries- one of them could be an answer to stay off Irene's bad side."

Terse looks were exchanged around the cluster. Hyunjin stepped farther into it, lowering his voice so Jisung couldn't hear. "If it keeps him safe, that's all that matters."

The subject in question was still murmuring to himself, listlessly moving his hands to map out half-formed plans which were dashed as they were wrought back into his hair, deepening the moss-green shade of worry in his eyes. "What do you want to do, Jisung?" asked Chan.

Jisung startled, as if he'd been wandering in another dimension entirely. "I..." He swallowed, spared one last look at the barred, familiar forest. "I think we should go. It'll be safer."

The resignation drifted weakly to the ground, like a feather come loose from a bird's wing. Behind their backs, an eerie giggle echoed, like one of the dryads laughing at them.

"Let's get to it, then," said Minho briskly. "Come on."

He lead Seungmin and Jeongin down first. Changbin and Hyunjin helped Jisung step away, turn his back, climb down the rocks. Felix lingered at the mouth of the forest, staring through its branches.

"You coming, Lix?" asked Chan.

"In a second." Felix formed a bulb of light in his hand like a skipping stone. With a flick of his wrist, the ball went bouncing past the I- triggering a tripwire flash of snapping branches and whiplash roots and vines.

Chan held out a hand to him on the rocks. "All good now?"

"Yup. Just wanted to check."

Minho slapped an invisibility glyph drawn on a blank motel form on the hood of the car, pressing a kiss to his forefingers and briefly touching the rear window before it faded from sight. Back on the shore, Hyunjin had lined up the group, passing out tiny, clear disks that looked like moonlight pills.

"They're for breathing underwater," Hyunjin explained. "Minho and I made them after the Malibu job, which we didn't want to repeat. Took a couple of months to perfect it, but we can finally declare them safe to use."

"Like anxiety meds, but for aquatic purposes," Jeongin noted. "Nice."

Jisung raised his hand. "Will the saltwater still burn my eyes?"

"No, thankfully, we tweaked it to have that additional plus. To answer your unsaid questions, yes, you can take these dry, no, it does not mean saltwater is safe to drink, and no, it will not be permanent- it only lasts a half hour before another one is taken. Also, we've been looking for a name, so if anyone's got any suggestions, that'd be

great. But for now, bottom's up- we'll be taking this journey down to the deep."

Hyunjin was able to dive in easily, followed by Jeongin and Felix. But it took a little bit of coaxing for the others to make their way down- specifically those who preferred to spend their time on solid ground, where the air had the option of being warm.

"Is this what it'd feel like to be in a coffin?" Chan asked, teeth chattering, waist deep in the water, Minho and Hyunjin holding his hands. His lips were already taking on a slightly blue quality.

"You escaped that fate," Minho reassured him, taking them two steps deeper. "You can accept this one."

"And it won't kill you either," Hyunjin added helpfully.

"I assume this is what baptism is like," said Seungmin, who'd bravely waded up to his shoulders.

"Except I'm gonna dunk myself this time," muttered Changbin, and he swallowed his pill and went under.

Once they'd gotten over the chill of the atmosphere and the sight of Nemo's school friends wafting around their heads, they started the trek down the sea floor, each step kicking up slow-motion grains of sand. Of course, it was only natural that they enjoy the anti-gravity aspect, as well as not having to come up for air and break the illusion: Jeongin and his boundless energy exuding in the cartwheels he executed across the sand, waving to the fish while he was at it, as well as Minho yanking him midflip back onto his feet before his hand could touch that urchin.

"I am not soaking your hand in fucking vinegar while you know *specifically* that I left it in the car," growled Minho.

But Jeongin giggled, choosing to focus on another underwater aspect. "Your voice makes bubbles when you talk." He gasped. "So

does mine!"

As they walked on, Changbin ran a hand along the back of a passing Atlantic ridley sea turtle, watching in childish wonder as it swam away into the seemingly endless abyss of shifting dark blue. "Whoa."

Felix adopted a similar idea, using another light bulb to draw in a wary crawfish. "Hi, buddy," he cooed, holding out his hand towards a nervous pincer. "You can touch it, it's oka- ow!" He shook the crawfish off his finger, flinched his hand away. "You didn't have to do *that!*"

Seungmin slapped the creature away, watched it drift off into oblivion. "Don't worry- it's probably going to be boiled for someone's family reunion."

Up ahead, Jisung trudged the path with his eyes on the sand, hands shoved in his denim pockets, ignoring the colorful anemones that bloomed at his very presence. He was too lost in his own head to be interested in any of it.

"She hasn't gotten this close in years," Chan whispered to Hyunjin. "It's shaken him up pretty bad."

"Zico did say something about her- with everything going on with Kai, we must've forgot," Hyunjin replied. "Almost makes me wish we'd kept the fucker alive to see how much he knew."

"Can't do anything about that now." Chan sighed, and one wavery bubble floated out of his mouth. "What if she's been following us? Just like Kai had?"

"It won't be any fault of ours- we make enemies of people who cover their tracks well." Hyunjin looked around at the ecosystem swimming around them, the red snappers and schools of trout weaving through patches of sea grass. "I hope this is enough to cover ours for a bit."

"I don't see why it wouldn't."

"Irene's a spriggan like him. If she's as close as we think she is, she'll have control over anything green in a mile radius."

"You did the best you could. You took us *underwater*- if there's a better disguise than that, I don't know it."

"But will it be good enough?" Jisung jumped at a bush of purple coral swaying near his feet. "If only to ease his mind."

Chan smiled sadly; it was the least he could offer. "Just like you said before- we'll find a way."

"*Hyunjin!*" Felix and Jeongin ran up, breathless smiles pasted eagerly on their faces.

"We were-" started Jeongin.

"We found-" cut in Felix. He elbowed the gumiho in the shoulder. "You tell him!"

"Okay!" Jeongin turned to them beaming. "So we were thinking about what you said about naming the water breathing pill, and all the fish around made us think of tuna, and you know how people call tuna chicken of the sea? Get this: your's and Minho's invention- *Advil* of the sea."

Felix had executed jazz hands for extra flair. "Huh? *Huh?*"

Both Chan and Hyunjin stared at them. The braincell power was simply too strong for them to do anything else.

"That," said Hyunjin, "is so beautiful."

"Hey, guys!" Jisung called. "Check this out."

Judging there was nothing much around but dunes, bleached coral reefs, and clueless marine life, there wasn't much else he could have been referring to except for the massive sunken ship dropped dead in the foreground.

The ship, pulled out of a history textbook and dropped into the bottom of the ocean, was washed in the hazy blue-green aura of any long-drowned wonder, perched miraculously upright in the sand. Its wooden hull had sustained centuries of damage, of rot and barnacles of every shape and size, even what looked to be cannonball holes. Chipped paint of swamp green and maroon red swept over the sides, polished by a landscape of mossy overgrowth. The sails, papery white quilts like dragon wings, though brushed with a thin layer of silt, clung to the spars as if ready to catch a wind and set sail again. The figurehead hosted the golden torso of a griffin prepared to pounce.

"Edward Teach just shat his bearded skeleton," quipped Jeongin.

"Retweet," Seungmin echoed.

Hyunjin swam up to the forepeak, shuddering as he scrubbed off the moss. "There's writing on this," he noted. "Anyone up to date on Chinese calligraphy?"

Chan only replied with, 'A little,' but it was enough for the siren to pull him up with him and bring him close enough to read the golden strokes. "'Skyway,'" Chan read aloud. "Minho? Anything in the records about a sunken ship off the coast of Louisiana?"

Minho whipped out his phone- which he'd cleverly stuck into a plastic bag before descending -and typed it in. "Nothing this close north."

"Perfect."

All possible tourists averted, the crew boarded the ship singing along to A Pirate's Life* with Jeongin leading the way, disappearing belowdecks to, *"A pirate's life sounds just right, sounds just right, I could say that twice, sounds just right..."*

However, the minute Felix produced enough light for it all to be visible, they found not even the dirtiest of shanties could contain the right words.

“Sometimes, I wonder if we’re lucky,” said Changbin, half disbelieving, “or just really, *really* good at finding things we’re not supposed to.”

“Whatever the case, the odds seem to tip in our favor more and more every time,” Minho responded, and walked straight into the gleaming, golden, straight mythological treasure trove.

Apparently, the powers that were decided, ‘fuck it, let’s bring a Disney classic to life’ and brought Ariel’s grotto and the Cave of Wonders mishmashed into the same deep sea locale: jewelry overflowing out of expensive vases, rows of ancient tomes crammed into library shelves, literal treasure chests stuffed to the brim with rubies, diamonds, whatever shiny trinket that the real pirates from years ago had slit throats and clubbed heads to find sitting right next to velvet furniture, on top of an intricately threaded rug. A lifetime’s worth of treasure sleeping with the fishes.

“Okay, so like.” Jeongin picked up a scepter; it might have also been a gold-plated molinillo. “We shouldn’t steal, because if Johnny Depp in a wig and a full tube of eyeliner has taught me anything, it’s that dead men *do*, in fact, tell tales, and we shouldn’t risk angering them if any of their souls rest on this ship, but looking around can’t be bad, right?”

The others were already spread out around the ship, guilty as charged. Chan slapped a Fabergé egg out of Felix’s hand, which he’d been so close to sticking in his pocket.

From there on out, the fuck-it meter exploded from one past a thousand. It was a coven gone wild- there was not one object in the whole belowdecks that didn’t have their greasy little mitts all over it.

“How the fuck are these pages still *holding*?” screeched Changbin, flipping through a leather bound copy of The Epic of Gilgamesh. “How is this still in my *hands*?!”

"It's called magic, dummy!" Felix yelled from the other side of the room, pulling a seemingly never ending string of pearls out of a treasure chest, leaving them to float around his shoulders like wisps of spider silk. "Get used to it!"

A bumble of books and boxes, several miscellaneous objects hitting the floor. "*Shit*," Seungmin cursed. "Wait- what the fuck is a *cheese grater* doing here?"

"If it looks like it's from the 1700's, then we've got a lot more to find the fuck out," conceded Jisung, who was finally letting loose.

While the rest of the gang dedicated their time to finding every sort of shiny something there was- and there were a lot of somethings, even a weird contraption Felix and Seungmin dug up, an age-old label classifying it as a double bicycle -Hyunjin hung back in the record collection, flipping through Pink Floyd and David Bowie to the tune of several horrified screams. He'd look up, every now and then, whenever something particularly alarming was said, or to make sure that Jeongin really hadn't cut his finger off, or to hear Jisung's laughter when Changbin realized of course he couldn't plug in the toaster anywhere, this is an underwater wooden ship.

He never realized how much he missed the sound until it was in danger of extinction.

Jesus. It was *still* ridiculous- something he couldn't quite believe himself. They were on the run from yet another scheming dictator with a grenade launcher loaded with trauma aimed at another one of their own, it was the last thing Hyunjin should have focused on.

But Irene was also the reason why Jisung couldn't stop sneaking glances at the stalk of kelp shifting in the window. So, yeah. It was something to appreciate.

For the moment, though, it was certainly worth noting that whoever had curated this music library knew their 70's- the good stuff, not a Michael Bolton to be seen. The collection was separated by the year

an album came out: for '73, classics like Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, New York Dolls, Innervisions. For 74, Diamond Dogs, Court And Spark, Sheer Heart Attack. '75-

Out from the Rolling Stones record, a paper slipped: laminated, aged, drifting face down for the floor. *If whoever this bastard is got an autograph from 70's Mick Jagger, this is something I have to see.* Curiosity killed the cat, but no one ever said anything about the fish.

Hyunjin snatched the slip out midsink and turned it over in his hands. Of course, the Polaroid *had* to be dark, and he just *had* to be standing in a spot where he couldn't make it out. Shaking out the photo, he held it up under one of Felix's many lightbulbs.

And for a moment, just stopped. Stood there. Stared. All hells, there was no way he could do anything else.

The picture was of two kids in clothes fit for a never ending summer-mortals would have called them teenagers, but they didn't know that. They just knew they were getting older and getting stronger because of it, as the sun kept rising and setting. They were fighting for a place in front of the camera, elbows grating against each other, hands pushing shoulder and laughingly shoving face out of the way. Auburn hair was blowing across her face in a rebellious wind while red had been tied back; it had started getting shaggy. But both of them were smiling so big and wide they couldn't see the sun, hear anything but the crashing waves at their backs, because they'd never had cause not to.

Below, the caption had been penned in unnaturally neat Sharpie: *First spring of '59.*

Hyunjin's vision blurred, feet swaying on their axis, knowing exactly what he was looking at and that it was real. There was no one else who could have taken that photo. *Meaning there was no one else who could have put it here.*

It took him three rocky tries to stick the photo in his pocket, start tearing records off the shelves and send them sinking to the floor, taking with them several coastal seashells and knickknacks that would never be found in stores today: cassette tapes and used up Walkmans and even a whole Jarvik heart which they'd never gotten to see.

When he got to the end of the 70's collection, amidst all the wreckage he'd caused, he saw it: buried beneath a Paul McCartney and Van Halen, the strand poking out. Hyunjin picked it up, and every memory came flowing back.

September 22, 1965. He'd found a long enough, thin enough strand of sargassum to dry out in the sun, weave together some copper wire from the old TV for a base to hold the tiny chunk of the aragonite growing in the sea floor. When he'd presented the necklace to Jinyoung, his older brother's face had split into a grin that nobody could ever emulate. He'd told him he loved it. He'd told him it was the most beautiful birthday gift a guy could ask for.

He told him he'd die before he ever took it off.

"Guys," Hyunjin called for his coven, but the ship had already started shaking, wood creaking and sand flying through the windows. Out of nearest one, he could see it coming: a giant shadowy bullet the size of a sailor's nightmare.

Obviously, the others had seen it too. "Our cue to leave?" asked Jeongin, just to be sure.

"Definitely," agreed Chan. "Gang, get your shit together, we're blowing this cocksicle joint."

Looping the necklace around his neck, Hyunjin ran to join them back up abovedecks, but the opening sealed off with a blur of ebony scales, each one the size of a full grown human hand. Everywhere they looked: every circular window or cannon hole was filled with the same rushing ink black.

"Maybe this is just a storm," said Changbin, sounding way too hopeful. "Is this what hurricanes look like in the ocean?"

"If we were in a hurricane, we would be *dead*," Minho told him. "It's safe to say our luck's run out."

"And so soon," Seungmin mourned.

Jisung had started rummaging the mythology section of the books, flipping through pages like mad. "Does anyone know anything about big fucking sea dragons?"

Felix pressed his forefingers to his temples, squeezed his eyes shut. "Bible knowledge, Bible knowledge..." His eyes snapped open. "Leviathan!"

The word volleyball-spiked Hyunjin's heart against his ribcage. "*Fuck.*"

"Great! Any idea how we can defeat it?"

Considerate pause. "Well..."

A cavernous growl reverberated through the water, inches away from the hull of the ship. "We don't exactly have time to think about logistics, Felix!" yelled Minho.

"Well, we're not exactly in the position to *bash its fucking head in*, are we?"

The leviathan seemed to have overheard outside- judging from the even louder growl that emanated from seemingly everywhere, it wasn't pleased. "Any minute now," Jisung hummed, singsong voice warbling with anxiety.

The blur of scales wove tighter around the ship, making a turbulent trio of Borromean rings in a continuous cycle, and the flashes of black in a single window made way for a sliver of murky, familiar bluegreen ocean, the only chance they'd get.

"Breach!" Seungmin shouted.

"Get back," warned Minho, palms lighting up with a celestial glow, shaping into a sphere where a star could bloom inside. When he shoved his hands outward, it burst through the wall and obliterated the window in its entirety, splinters of wood wafting about.

"Go, go, go!" Chan ushered them out one by one, hurdling over the leviathan's serpentine body like a garden fence, himself jumping out last.

They fled like thieves escaping a crime scene, hands empty and hearts racing. Their steps might have been faster, had they known how to properly do so underwater. But, with their shoes clinging to their feet, clothes weighing them down, it was like running in a bodysuit of lead.

When they got far enough to fully size up their competition- their Six Flags Magic Mountain-sized chariot of death competition -the decision pretty much made itself.

"We're not gonna stick around and fight, are we?" asked Felix.

"Nah," Chan replied easily. "I think we're just gonna run this time and see if seaweed makes any good shadows."

They started to follow after him, swimming off towards the seagrass surrounding the jutting bevy of rocks, when Hyunjin called back the existence of his voice. "Wait!"

Only Jisung- whose jacket had been holding him back anyways - hung back, turned around to see his feet rooted to the sand. "What?" Hyunjin tried to shape his thoughts into word form, push them out of his mouth. "What is it?"

"I- I think it might be-"

A furious roar from the leviathan kicked up clouds of sand, rippled the flow of the tides, made every ship in the Gulf of Mexico head straight for home. The pair of them looked up, and the beast was looking back. Its whirling typhoon eyes flooded with hunger and violence, taking them in as nothing more than enemies to crush.

"Come on!" Changbin shouted, grabbing Jisung's arm, forcing him to grab Hyunjin's and take off.

A whoosh of a body moving through water, quick sound, a flurry of bubbles that trailed after, and the coven didn't even have time to scream when the leviathan's great serpent body swept enforcingly into view, curled around their path in a dangerous new circuit, moving at the speed of a bullet train. It forced them into a huddle, like a pack of sardines, a mouse that couldn't even fight back as the cobra wove closer, tightening the noose.

The head came rearing down at them but instead of swallowing them up, it cinched the final loop and jerked them *up*- up out of the choppy malachite waters that frothed like the maw of a rabid dog, where a churning charcoal storm raged overhead, and the cold air frosted the water on their skin into ice.

The leviathan dumped them out on the craggy cluster they'd been running to before, the webbed spine of its back spiraling around them like a ring of fire, barbed wire walls closing in. Its head craning down over them, a sorry, bedraggled Prometheus clump slumped against the rocks, they could see the face properly in place of a sun that had turned its back: a jet black Biblical nemesis whose horror the pages had never quite been able to capture, come straight from the nethermost pits of the trenches to protect its treasures, growling leagues of seafoam through razor-white teeth lining the inside of powerful jaws. In two twin pools of bottomless lagoons, there was nothing to be seen but fury.

Changbin pressed his palms to the rocks, spitting out saltwater. "Fucking *fuck* this." Pushing onto his knees, he staggered to his feet, wisps of darkness forming in his palms. "Is that all you got?"

"Changbin-" Hyunjin coughed, trying to bring himself up. "Changbin, no!"

But his rallying cry had roused the others as well, shook them out of their sea-soaked stupor. Chan was hoisting up Seungmin by the waist, draping an arm around his shoulders. Minho and Felix were gripping the edges of rocks to stand, draining whatever light they could find in their environment to fuel their power. Jeongin was shaking the last of the water off his sweater, crouching into fox form. Jisung was still crouching on the jagged surface, but the algae sprouting on the sides of the boulders were reaching out to his trembling fingertips, a staticky answer to his pleas.

"Guys, *please*, listen!"

His begging was washed away in the ruthless growl of another roar from the leviathan, like a thunderclap. Hyunjin was still cowered in the center; it wasn't able to see him.

"Let's get this over with," Minho muttered, rubbing his hands together, revving up the energy.

Maybe, Hyunjin thought desperately, *just maybe he will hear me*. If it really was him, that much he would remember.

The leviathan's teeth bared, looking like the bars to the pearly gates of an afterlife Hyunjin had never believed in, yet he brushed past his defenses and rushed up to meet it, welcoming it with open arms.

*"All the leaves are brown, and the sky is gray,"**

"Jin, what the *fuck*," seethed Minho.

"*Shhh*," hissed Jisung. "Look."

Hyunjin stepped closer. *"I've been for a walk on a winter's day,"*

The leviathan had frozen in the tumult, mouth dropping closed. Slowly, it blinked the saltwater out of its eyes.

"I'd be safe and warm, if I was in LA,"

It was as though the whole storm was being put on pause, the sea god Poseidon calming his orchestra to hear the lyrics.

"California dreaming, on such a winter's day,"

The first chorus sifted into the salty air. The coven held their breath. Jisung released his grip on the algae as he watched Hyunjin, a saint resurfaced, water still glistening on his body like mollified shards of bulletproof glass, carried on to the first verse.

"Stopped into a church, I passed along the way,"

As if to listen closer, the leviathan lowered itself to the rocks, loosening the cage of his circle to, *"I got down on my knees, and I pretend to pray,"*

"You know the preacher likes the cold, he knows I'm gonna stay,"

"California dreaming, on such a winter's day,"

The waves came back to life, tamed by a symphony that contained the tide in cymbal crashes and shifting foam, the flowing wind taking the place of the woodwind section as the leviathan's body uncoiled, shrank into itself, obsidian scales fading from black to gray to human honey gold- cheeks flushed by the wind, swoopy black hair that, when it was touched by the breeze, it looked almost like the darkest shade of green, ebullient blue eyes that made anyone believe in the mercy of a monsoon.

"No way," breathed out Minh.

"Wait a minute," murmured Chan.

"Is that-?" Felix began, but the look on Hyunjin's face said it all- a being who'd stared into the sun and found its core.

"All the leaves are brown," sang the leviathan, his voice deep and profound, sweet as a miracle. *"And the sky is gray,"*

"I've been for a walk," he touched the ground before Hyunjin, and a roll of thunder cackled, making way for a beam of sunlight to come shining through. *"On a winter's day,"*

"And if I didn't tell her," the pair sang, voices twining in harmony to the aftermath of what could have been a disaster, *"I could leave today,"*

"California dreaming, on such a winter's day,"

"On such a winter's day,"

"On such a winter's day..."

Hyunjin stayed stock-still for the hand that pushed a lock of wet hair out of his eye, swallowed down the Gordian knot that prevented him from speaking. "It's you," he whispered, quiet as the surf retreating from the shore.

Jinyoung exhaled a puff of a laugh, hardly daring to blink, to believe it himself. "Hyunjin." He laughed again, half-soaked in a sob, in the tears welling up in their eyes. "It's been so long."

Maybe Hyunjin was already pulling him in, or maybe Jinyoung had reached out first, but they met in the middle of the space, arms flung around each other, holding on tight so that nothing could take the moment away.

"I missed you," Hyunjin wept, muffled in his shoulder. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"I missed you too." Jinyoung held him impossibly tighter. "It's gonna be okay now. Everything's okay."

Meanwhile, keeping the voice tones to a minimum as to give the reunion a peaceful grounding, Seungmin muttered, "If that's who I

think it is, I'm flipping this boulder."

"If memory serves right," said Changbin, not even hiding his wonder, "I think we almost got killed by Hyunjin's brother."

With context, it was understandable why Jinyoung had shifted straight into leviathan mode: the ship belonged to a friend, used to be their old home, until eventually it just became a storage unit for things they hadn't wanted to forget. They'd cast an enchantment over it so they'd know when some dumbass decided to get stupid and fuck around with their stuff and how fast they could get back at them for it.

To apologize for nearly killing his little brother's coven (an apology which Chan eagerly intercepted), Jinyoung offered them a ride out to his place upon hearing their situation.

"Call it good old-fashioned Southern hospitality," Jinyoung winked.

Fifteen minutes later, luggage gathered and extra protection spell cast over the car, he'd turned back into his sea dragon self (much less threatening than before) to ferry them across the coast.

"Not even a full hour, and we're already riding bareback," mused Minhø.

"I will drown you with this entire ocean," Hyunjin told him.

Still, he must have had enough sentiment to hold him back. Free from bloodshed, it made for a much more efficient way out.

"Okay, when were you going to tell us that we were wandering the bottom of the ocean for no reason since your brother just *happens* to live out here?" asked Jeongin.

"*And* that he was fucking hot," added Felix.

Changbin raised a hand. "Seconded."

"First of all, I didn't even know he was *alive* up until five minutes ago," Hyunjin countered. "Second, shut up. My brother is not hot."

"Yes *he is*," the entire coven shot back.

"No."

"Ask anyone - they'll spell his name like B-I-L-F," said Jeongin

"Oh, my- *no!*" Hyunjin splashed him in the face with a handful of sea spray. "You're so *gross*."

"Your brother is Aphrodite risen from the waves- if I can say that regardless of the fact that he tried to kill us a few minutes ago, it's true," Seungmin concluded.

"What if he could hear you right now?"

"Then tell him Seungmin says thank you for saving us- and that his partner is a lucky individual."

"He's-" He reined it back in, let the prospect hit him in full. "*Shit*. Do you really think he's with someone?"

"Given the family genetics transcended so beautifully, I'd be surprised if he wasn't," replied Chan. Hyunjin hunched over the side of the rushing waters. "Hey, come on. You were able to recognize each other- I'm sure he hasn't changed *that* much."

"I've changed. Why wouldn't he?" The coast passed him by, disappearing in white foam around his fingers. "This is my first look at his life in forty-seven years. I don't know what I'm going to see."

Jisung looked up, ready to speak up himself, but caught sight of what lay over Hyunjin's shoulder, eyes going wide. "Maybe something like that."

The coast of Louisiana had vanished behind their backs; in front of them was the largest, most undoubtedly beautiful Chinese temple that couldn't possibly exist on any mortal plane, complete with golden lined pagoda rooftops furled like spruce green mountaintops, tall red painted pillars that seemed to have been sprouted from the rough-hewn earthen isle it was planted upon, vines of plum blossoms cascading down with waterfalls and plunging greenery.

"Holy Minecraft Chinese mythology template," noted Felix.

"Mojang fucking wishes," whispered Minho.

Jinyoung coasted along the shoreline to let them off before he shrank into the water, serpent scales retracting until they shrank into a tail, which disappeared up under the hem of a light green bomber jacket that must have been enchanted waterproof, since it didn't sustain a drop of their journey.

He rose up out of the water behind the direct spotlight of the sun, shaking the droplets out of his hair like the tears of angels. "Jaebum came across The Fortunate Isles in the 1910's when the tennin who lived in it passed away. We don't have many visitors, but you won't be turned down."

"Really, we can't thank you enough for this," Chan told him earnestly.

"It's not a problem- we've got more than enough room. Besides, if you guys've managed to keep Hyunjin alive this long, it's the least I can do in return."

"Kept me alive?" Hyunjin repeated, in the high air of offense.

"Only joking," promised Jinyoung, in a tone that lightly suggested he wasn't. "Come on- I told Jaebum I was bringing company. Oh, and Seungmin?"

In the very back of the group, Seungmin shot up straight. "Hm?"

Jinyoung awarded him a smile that could have warmed the Epipelagic Zone to five hundred degrees. "You're welcome."

He turned and beckoned for the others to follow. Seungmin, standing dumbly in the surf, was actively trying to keep from melting in the process, laughing helplessly between words. "Nice. Great, uh- you're w- you just said you're welcome. Uh..." Jeongin giggled as he passed him by, glittering with humor, which definitely didn't help. "Oh no."

Minho patted his shoulder. "Just take a minute, let it pass."

Weaving up the side of the island were stone stairs that lead precariously up to the top; they could have been manmade, could have already been there. Waiting at the gates on the brink was a man who looked like he'd been pacing the perimeter for hours, shoving the wavy black-blue hair out of his eyes in a rolled-up chambray and chinos.

When he caught sight of Jinyoung, his face flooded with relief. "Thank the gods. I was starting to think you'd run into more trouble." His eyes, sharp, piercing black as coal, welcomed them just as easily as his counterpart had. "So these are the stowaways?"

"They're good stock, don't worry," replied Jinyoung. "Can you guess which one's my brother?"

"Like I'd need to- it's all in the eyes." The man addressed Hyunjin, a friendly appraisal. "He hasn't stopped talking about you for forty-seven years."

Hyunjin smiled weakly. "That long?"

"Jaebum was the first being who found me washed up on Holly Beach in '75," Jinyoung explained. "He brought me here, and, well..." The first flash of nervousness crossed over his face; Jaebum soothed it with taking his hand into his. "Hyunjin, I'd like you to meet my husband."

“You have a *husband*?”

“You guys are *married*?” Chan exclaimed even louder; his excitement was barely contained in his voice.

Seungmin reined him in. “Keep it in your pockets, the ring’s still there.”

Jaebum held up his right hand- the silver ring on his finger glimmered with a rough cut diamond in the center, matching the one on Jinyoung’s. “Been together since 1980- we’re looking at thirty-eight years now. Took a while to get started, what with the lives we had before, and a coven in between, but-” Hyunjin was drained of one year of his life with every word he said. “Y’know, it’s been good. Not to entirely pop your mind.”

“Hold on- you guys have a coven?” Jeongin popped in. “Are they here now?”

“Yup- seven of us. Don’t worry, they’re friendly. Got7- serving the state of Louisiana since 1935 whenever the fuck we feel like it.”

The sentence made its way to them backwards, each word hitting with an impact of its own. Slowly, all eyes turned to Minho and Chan, whose shit was blowing up in slow motion.

“I’m sorry,” Chan managed, “your coven is called *what*?”

“On the nose, I know,” Jinyoung admitted. “We were thinking of changing it, but, alas, we were drunk, and anything out of Bambam sounded good at that point, so-“

“Bambam? As in, salamander, four crazy cats, here right now?”

“Don’t really know anyone else who’d choose such a name,” said Jinyoung, only registering the width of Chan’s eyes when they’d reached the size of quarters. “I think I just missed an ellipsis.”

“It’s nothing,” Minho intercepted quickly. “Well, not really nothing, but-“

“*Bambam!*” Chan yelled over the ornately painted gates, having sidestepped Jinyoung and Jaebum. “It’s Chan! And the guys! We’re here!”

“Chan?” A sizzle and crash from behind the walls, like oil burning on a griddle. “*Chan!*” The shout returned undertoned by rapid pounding footsteps. “Holy shit, my *dude!*”

“They go back a really long time,” Hyunjin clarified.

Jaebum tried to slow the encounter as much as he could. “Bambam, don’t jump the gate, it’s there for a reason- !”

But a flashy streak of firecracker red cut through the sentence, sailing over the gate and straight for the spot of ground where Chan was standing, arms wide open for another flying catch. “*Chan!*”

Bambam didn’t land so much as crash into Chan’s arms, digging the heels of his shoes into the dirt and sending him skidding backwards. When the smoke cleared, it drifted back to reveal the man himself strangling him in a hug mere inches away from the edge of the stairs, both of them holding each other steady by the shoulders.

“*What are you doing here?*” Bambam screeched.

“What are *you* doing here?” Chan screeched back.

“I live here!”

“I just got here!”

“Fucking *seriously?*”

“You never told me your island was in Louisiana!”

“You never got past the fact that it was an island!” Jaebum tapped the salamander on the shoulder, and he turned around. “Oh, hey everybody.”

“How far back do you guys go?” Jinyoung asked the group.

“Well, they met at Levanter in ‘33,” answered Seungmin, thinking through the math. “Then Bambam left in ‘37 to join a coven with Yugyeom, and...” He trailed off just long enough for all of them to get it. “Shit.”

“So,” Changbin pointed to Bambam. “You’ve known *him*,” he pointed to Jinyoung, “for forty-seven years. Which, in that time, I’m assuming you’d brought up your missing brother.”

“There wasn’t a day where I didn’t,” said Jinyoung quietly.

“So.” Felix gestured to the everything about their situation. “This whole thing could have been solved had we just connected the dots?”

Waves crashed in the distance. A seagull squawked.

“Well, if it makes for a better subject change,” attempted Jisung, “I’m currently on the run from Mother Nature’s evil twin.”

“For that, I’d think you guys really have to come inside,” quipped Jaebum.

As it turned out, he hadn’t just been thankful for the diversion. Jaebum knew exactly who Irene was: “A being with that many universal code names goes around like wildfire.”

The rest of Got7 was gathered in a courtyard of their own: a wide square of stone steps around a center lawn of packed golden sand, a fountain burbling from the mouths of stone koi fish in midleap over blushing lotus lily pads making up the heart. Behind more red pillars,

traditional luxury furniture found in the palaces of nobles from dynasties before were mixed in with splashes of modernity: flatscreens and beanbags and arcade consoles- even a hammock strung up in place of an open window.

“Don’t worry about the whole boat thing,” said Jackson, a brown-haired griffin who Jinyoung introduced to them as the friend with said boat. “We usually just send Jinyoung here out to scare off any divers who get too close. I haven’t sailed it in decades.”

Felix, to his credit, was using most of his brain power to keep his focus on the man's handsome face rather than the arms he’d so audaciously crossed. “And when you say that... you mean that you actually captained a ship?”

“He was something of a pirate back in the 40’s,” said Jinyoung behind him. “Took out a bunch of Los Angeles gambling ships back then- he was the guy who sank the Rex.”

“Hey, Lix!” Chan called from the living room, where a full conversation pit was waiting for them. “We’re waiting on you!”

“Okay, we are going to talk a lot more about that later,” Felix promised, already walking away backwards. “Later hopefully being a time where the friend group isn’t six inches away from death? Yeah! Later.” Jackson gamely waved goodbye in response.

As cups of home-brewed chrysanthemum tea were passed around the pit along with the party-size bag of Fritos Yugyeom threw in the mix, the gang let loose their tale of early morning near death entanglement with Irene's forces (“Hot damn,” piped Bambam from the very back when Jisung revealed that he'd woken everyone up with Uptown Funk).

"She sent an entire forest after you guys?" asked Youngjae, a surprisingly cheerful reaper whose swoopy blue hair was the exact same shade of blue in the ocean. "She didn't do that for you, did she, Mark?"

"Fuck no," Mark replied from the strongest branch of an indoor guest-greeting pine. "All she did was send dryads to wrap vines around my legs and pull me out of the tree I'd been sleeping in. Not even personal. But hey- at least Jaebum found me before anything happened."

"What'd you do to make her want anything to do with you?" asked Minh.

"Dude, I'm a leshy. All I did was mess with campers and fix up lost kids until they found their way back." He leaned back against the trunk of the tree that very well might've been his, like he was remembering the night. "No one ever does anything to make her look their way. She just picks you off the ground, and that's it."

"If she went to those lengths to get to you guys, you must definitely mean something to her," said Jaebum.

Jisung drooped, looking wretchedly down into his tea. "We wish she didn't," said Chan in his place.

It might've been big brother senses acting up, or perhaps Jinyoung was always so kind, but it something to watch him lean forward, steady the hand that had started to rattle the cup in it, not a boundary overstepped. "What did Irene do to you?"

Jisung peeked warily around at the eyes on him, trying to convince himself that they belonged to friends, not enemies. "It wasn't anything rare- I was far from the first she tried to recruit, but..." The tea in his cup listed towards the rim; he took another sip to calm his nerves. "When 1975 came around, she cursed my forest. Brought a flood that took out everything, just like that." If he listened hard enough, he could hear the Columbia River roaring overhead. "What was left of it, anyway, I mean- it'd already been dying out, what with all the mortals cutting shit down, forcing everybody out, but..." Jisung scoffed, shook his head. "She'd already asked three times before- every time I told her I wouldn't go with her. The last one was where she drew the line. The only reason why she'd spared me for so long

in the first place was because she didn't know another spriggan in the same state. I just... I knew what she was doing. What she was planning, and I... I didn't want to be a part of it. I didn't want to use my power the way she used hers."

Changbin looped an arm around his shoulder, a friendly neighborhood reminder that it wasn't his fault. "She found out he was alive in 2006, and has been sending letters updating him on the Wild Hunt ever since," said Seungmin. "Sixteen years, and she hasn't changed her tactic."

"What's even the big deal about some nature cult?" complained Yugyeom. "It can't be that different from a coven, can it?"

"The Wild Hunt's more than that," insisted Jisung. "She goes around, state to state, collecting every earth monster she can find who she thinks will help her cause. They travel around looking for recruits in any nature setting everywhere, making it look like some neverending party with Irene in the lead. The big idea's to build something big enough to rival every coven out there, prove that the earth is superior, or some shit."

"Kuvira but no redemption," summed up Jeongin.

"For her not to look for you, you have to be dead, along the lines, or nonexistent." Jisung drained the last of his tea, downing even the dregs at the bottom. "If she thinks you can do something to help her, it's your funeral."

"Well," started Mark heavily, "we can't say it's gotten any better on our end."

"We try to stay out as much as possible so she won't track us," explained Jaebum, "but from what we know, she's been gaining more and more Southern territory every year- sometimes as little as three faeries, other times as much as the whole of Croatoan. We don't know how much of Louisiana she's got in her bag, but she's not going anywhere."

"We only barely touched the coast before she caught on," said Changbin. "Got any ideas as to what we can do without sticking a target on our backs?"

Got7 rounded on one another, exchanging an unsteady circle of questioning looks that, after getting a vote from all of them, softened into simultaneous agreement. "The only reason we've had no contact with Irene is because The Fortunate Isles have been encrypted with every enchantment known to monster," said Jackson. "We can help you find a safe way out, but in the meantime, you can stay here."

"It'll mean laying low for a bit," said Youngjae, "but for the time being, you'll be safe."

After everything they'd heard, the boys didn't really know how they could turn that kind of promise down.

Meeting adjourned, the task of the day was switched to Got7 getting their guests properly situated: Chan and YugBam properly catching up with each other, Jackson effortlessly hauling two duffel bags on his shoulder while Mark and Felix tried unsuccessfully not to swoon about it, Minhoo relaying suitcases from Jinyoung, who hauled them up to Jaebum, who swooped down just in time to catch them, obsidian dragon wings keeping him afloat. Changbin and Jeongin fawning over Bambam's cats as Youngjae told them the names while Seungmin stood back overseeing the whole thing, bag of Fritos in hand, yelling the occasional phrase of support.

"Thanks again for this," Hyunjin told Jaebum, who had landed next to him to take his backpack up to the second floor guest rooms. "We'll try not to annoy you guys too much."

"Kid, I've been leading a coven full of guys since before the Depression- it'll take more than a little extra company to push us over the edge." With a sparkling smile, he nodded to Jinyoung, who'd found Jeongin's rock collection in his bag. "A couple days away from the outside world'll be good for all of us."

But Hyunjin couldn't look too long before his gaze strayed back to Jisung at the open window, cradling a plum blossom with one hand, looking out into the sea like he was trusting it not to swallow him up again. "Let's hope so."

A Contracorriente - Alvaro Soler, David Bisbol

*Whipped into Shape - Legally Blond Ensemble

*Uptown Funk - Mark Ronson, Bruno Mars

*A Pirate's Life - Joel Fry

*California Dreamin' - The Mamas & The Papas (or the Sia version, that slaps too)

No Roots

Chapter 20: No Roots

And here we are with another enemy to face and another relationship in focus! Wonder how this'll end~

BUT until we get to that, we stumble onto another piece of backstory, this time telling Hyunjin's side of things.

TW: brief descriptions of blood and drowning.

I've got no roots, but my home was never on the ground

I've got no roots, but my home was never on the ground

I've got no roots,

I've got no roots...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Bermuda Triangle - 1974

Peace and quiet couldn't get much better than this.

"This is Ground Control to Major Tom," sang David Bowie from the cassette player, turned all the way up. "You've really made the grade,"

"And the papers want to know whose shirt you wear,"

If leaving the capsule really was an option, Hyunjin wasn't taking it- not when the world could be reduced to one song playing out of

foam headphones, and a man could lie back on his bed, close his eyes and drift off into space like the oddity he heard in the lyrics.

"This is Major Tom to Ground Control,"

"I'm stepping through the door,"

"And I'm floating in the most peculiar way,"

"And the stars look very different today..."

There were only a few times in Hyunjin's life where he wondered if he really was lost.

Maybe he'd be a little more curious, had he known anything concrete about the world outside of the Triangle. He had never met his parents (assuming he *had* any, and wasn't just formed from an enchanted rush of seafoam)- the only family he knew had been with him all his life. If they had cared about him, they probably wouldn't have dumped their kids on an island to make a home in what looked like a Gothic chapel from the outside. Really- tall cobblestone walls, pointed ceilings, a fucking *rose window* in the entrance? Couldn't have been anything else.

He always suspected his room had been an upstairs wine cellar, what with the tang of salt and sour grapes that seemed content to fog up the air. There wasn't a lot one could do for decoration, but with everything that washed up on the shores, he'd learned how to be creative. On the floor: a floral handwoven carpet that the tag said was from Puerto Rico. The vanity: a find that the nakki with pet eel Precious had helped him dig up, now cluttered with brushes, pencils, and pens in jars, trays of pigments in every shade of the rainbow. The bed: two pallets with a mattress that had taken almost the entire week to dry up, topped off with a trusty waterproof sleeping bag. And on the walls were every record and poster Jinyoung had managed to smuggle safe and dry: Velvet Underground, Ramones, Queen, Pink Floyd, and one guilty pleasure Patti LaBelle. A guy made do with what he had in order to enjoy the little things.

If there were any Catholic monk ghosts stuck throughout the past few decades watching a group of sea monster triplets grow up, they must've really been praying on their downfall since the sinking of the Titanic.

Sometimes, there was nothing that made Hyunjin smile quite like the thought of that.

And nothing that wiped it off his face like the conch Yeji chucked through his window.

It was open, thankfully, but the shell itself splattered the rug with wet clumps of sand. *"Hyunjin!"*

Oh, the days where I wish I could drown. "No."

"I've yelled your name like, three times!"

"And therefore it should say something that I haven't replied."

"Have you been blasting your music again?" Hyunjin very pointedly did not answer. "Jeez- you're gonna bust your fucking eardrums."

"If it means I won't have to hear you screaming at me, I'll get right back to it."

"If you think that's going to stop me from learning sign language out of spite, you don't know me at all."

Unfortunately, she had a point- that much he knew. Switching the music on pause, he rolled off the mattress and on his feet, kicking aside the conch shell as he trudged up to the window, headphones slung around his neck. "What'd you find this time?"

There wasn't a lot of sense to be made out of 70's fashion trends, but Yeji had seemed to embrace the whole frayed jeans, purposely weathered t-shirt with a cheerful slogan- though she didn't let any product touch her hair. "Those motherfuckers used radium in their

lipstick," proclaimed Yeji. "I'll stick with saltwater." So far, it hadn't effected either of them. Natural oceanic genes would do that for you.

Today, her shirt was a Suzi Quatro tee bruised with rings of salt stains, tucked into ripped jeans that were cuffed above the sand that clung to her ankles. Her auburn hair had been swept over her shoulder already in the process of drying in the sun, whipping around the expectant scowl on her face. "The son has risen."

"Says the loser who stayed in the trenches for three days straight introducing the morgens to glam rock."

"Before me they were listening to German death metal at the bottom of the sea. If anything, I was doing them a favor." Behind her back, she produced a green beer bottle with a triumphant smile. "Check it out."

Hyunjin couldn't help it; he had to laugh. "You're kidding me. That's the third one in two weeks."

"Don't love the bottle- the bottle loves me." She uncorked it to dump out the rolled-up letter inside. "Look at that *parchment!* Practically vintage."

"Yeah, yeah, come *on!* What does it say on the inside?"

Rolling her eyes, she chucked the bottle over her shoulder to unfurl the paper. Clearing her throat, Yeji held up the parchment to the sunlight. "Dearest Lottie, I miss you more than words can suffice."

"Blech."

"This war is long and arduous, with many a tragic happening, but the thought that you will be at home waiting for me makes me rise again, hoping it will all be worthwhile." Yeji nodded like, *not bad*. "I doubt this letter will reach you, but miracles happen all the time, and there's no other beer for me to have to myself in a mile radius. See

you soon.” Her eyes trailed to the bottom of the page and bulged.
“Hell in a fucking *handbasket*.”

“There it is,” Hyunjin murmured, picking the sand out of his nails with a thumb.

“*Look!*”

The picture she’d pulled out had come in all black and white. Hyunjin had to lean halfway out the window to see what she was talking about. “Holy shit, is that real?”

“Imagine killing a guy, finding *this* in his wallet, and knowing you will never be safe again.”

Lottie, as it turned out, had the physique of a bodybuilder that could have snapped Hyunjin’s back over her knee. “Sure wish I could’ve seen those two in a couple history books.”

“Jinyoung made us read so many.” Yeji folded up both the picture and letter. “So? What do we think? Wash-up of the month?”

Another thing they did. With all the shit that got lost at sea, it wasn’t like it was something they could *not* do. “Nah, not good enough.”

“What? Come on, it at least deserves a place.”

“Then it gets a medal of honor and a spot on the wall,” Hyunjin replied dryly. “Come on, we’ve found dozens of bottles with all kinds of weird shit- hell, just last week, that matzo ball soup recipe from the ‘20’s.”

“You’re just saying that because *you* didn’t find it,” Yeji retorted.

“Now, there’s no reason for *that* kind of hostility.”

“Please, you said the exact same thing when I found that ten foot lava lamp by the rocks.”

“And now we have a nightlight which just happens to glow orange whenever there’s a rainstorm and I am *thankful* for that, okay? I can acknowledge that Lottie must have been an exceptional woman-”

“- who can put me in a headlock -”

“- and also a bullet point which we can circle back to in order to discuss your thought-provoking taste in women-”

“Hyunjin, you don’t understand. I want a woman who can *destroy* me.”

"And I want a guy who knows how to match pitch, but we can't all get what we want, can we?"

"Told you not to go out with that draug."

“Moving on to the point,” he deflected. “We find like, six bottles every month. Most of them are love letters, battle plans, and, if we get lucky, something else entirely. Therefore, wash-up of the month will stay the live Word War Two bomb-”

“ - that you and Jinyoung found fishing -”

“ - and *you* set off by accident. Win-win-win.”

Yeji probably would have responded with something even more acerbic had the dragon spine not broken through the face of the ocean a rapidly decreasing hundred yards away.

Any uneducated mortals would have thought the curved ridges of spine cutting the water like revolving blades forged in gunmetal gray to be some kind of prehistoric beast emerging from a defrosted chunk of ice, an urban legend, a wayward Nessie making an entrance. But to them?

“Race you to the shore,” said Yeji.

“*Fuck* you,” Hyunjin sniped after her, and dipped out the window.

The entrance door was the starting line; she waited until he'd fully regained his footing to shoot off in a sprint.

Feet pounding in the sand, plumes of golden grains kicked up after every step, laughing through strides over bushes of creeping phlox, leapfrogging over slabs of rock and the leafy yellow primrose clumps that hid underneath. The rolling dunes were crossed in running leaps that barely touched the ground, like they were the mythical illustrations of the nymphs that had been sketched into pages long before their birth, flying through a world that couldn't tie them down.

They called it a race, but they reached the shore in a tie, both out of breath and beaming wide, eyes on the giant, snakelike shadow shrank under the water into a smoky anthropomorphic shape, one that became more and more solid with every step it took closer to the surface. Little by little, a sheaf of black hair settled over his head, a madras shirt and jeans, two suitcases in each hand-

"Jinyoung!" Hyunjin and Yeji yelled, bolting straight into the breaking waves.

Their big brother met them in a grin. "Bring it in, assholes."

Just like that, all the distance between them- the miles of oceans and countries and weeks of waiting for his return -became nothing. Suitcases thrown to the shore, Jinyoung caught the both of them without even stumbling back from the force, letting himself be engulfed by the same dramatic, hard-hitting, saltwater-scented hug he was met with every time. In the end, it never mattered how many times they'd been drawn and apart; they were always brought together again.

Yeji pulled back first. "I sent you three bottles. Why didn't you respond to *one*?"

"Maybe he thought someone littered on the seaside again," snarked Hyunjin.

"If I'd seen them, I didn't realize it," Jinyoung replied, ruffling his hair. "But after what I show you today, you won't have to send another bottled letter ever again."

Such a phrase couldn't have amazed them more. "*Really?*"

"The world is growing up with you two." Jinyoung steered their shoulders out of the surf and back to the shore. "And it is up to me to teach you how."

Every six months, once the sundial announced that they were halfway through the year, Jinyoung would pack a bag and speed-cruise off out of the triangle, stay on the land out there for three weeks, coming back with a second case full of the newest random inventions the humans had come up with, plus a few extra treats.

"What the hell *is* this?" Hyunjin asked, marveling the first thing that had caught his eye: a multicolored cube.

"The humans call it a Rubik's cube," Jinyoung answered. "Apparently if you solve it by matching all the colors, it'll reveal the secrets of the universe."

"Give you 'till the end of the day," Yeji challenged.

"*Done.*"

"Careful with those!" Jinyoung yelped at Hyunjin; he'd tossed a tiny cardboard package over his shoulder. "Vera needs her contacts- you know how her eyes are going."

"Pride of the Seven Seas, still keeping up his reputation," teased Hyunjin, who was promptly shoved into the sand.

"All the time she spends with those anglerfish, not really a wonder why," muttered Yeji, who'd already gotten to work on an Etch-A-Sketch.

"Don't be rude now, Yeji- we don't have to understand the choices people make."

"But seriously- why emigrate from the Russian glaciers and then *immediately* go down into the deep?" vented Hyunjin. "Do all rusalkas have that logic?" He picked up a calculator. "And when are we ever going to need *this*?"

"Everything requires math sometime, no matter how much we hate it." Yeji lifted her sketchboard with the words *Fuck You* chiseled on. "Very mature."

"Breaks the record of forty seconds, though," Hyunjin noted.

"And, speaking of groundbreaking technology, that brings me to the crux of my discoveries." Jinyoung brought out a Converse shoebox and popped the lid like a treasure chest. "Behold, the first mobile phone."

Hyunjin and Yeji dropped what they were doing to look. It wasn't that impressive of a thing- just two rectangular pieces of plastic with a number base and two speakers.

"With all the hype going around these things, I was kind of expecting more," Yeji confessed.

"Then I'll have you know that this is only the beginning," said Jinyoung, the proper salesman. "Today, we have a box. Tomorrow- who knows? That's the beauty of the world, and how it moves. You never know what to expect."

"So, do we know how it works?" Hyunjin asked.

"It's part of a set, see?" Jinyoung brought out an answering machine; he always made a point to go to the local zaratan for an enchantment update. "This part will stay here in the house." He picked up the second handset. "And this will go with me. We'll have to get it enchanted when I leave again next year, but then we'll be

ready.” His smile crossed over his face, the one that made anyone believe in the impossible. “Once we figure it out, it’ll be like I never left.”

Naturally, that much just wasn't true. The phrase 'they lit up a room when they walked in' was literally invented because of him. If Moses could part the sea, it was because Jinyoung had written a permission slip. He was everyone's golden boy without even trying; the god they prayed to in the night for calm seas, the hero of the whole damn village. Things always shone a little a dimmer when he wasn't around.

But until next year rolled around, they could appreciate him with the best gift of all: music.

It was the best saved for last, always at the bottom of the suitcase. Records and cassettes of the newest songs, regardless of the genre. The choices were spread out on a beach towel or two, and the three of them swarmed over their favorites: Hyunjin snatching up a Sheer Heart Attack record with a Minnie Riperton cassette, laughing his ass off at Yeji, who *insisted* that Billy Joel wasn't just for sad old men on their yachts with Jinyoung reminding them not to crush the ABBA record, he'd had to hit a hippie with a stick to get it, all while pretending not to shove Dolly Parton's latest under his arm.

Long ago, Jinyoung had managed to bring in enough record players and Walkmans for the whole neighborhood, so whatever they didn't like was auctioned off to the public, who had a special kind of taste all on their own- which was to say it was either relatable, terrible, or not even worth being questioned. Perhaps there was logic that should have come into question, but with the bubbles that surfaced when a record spun and the humming of voices from under the waves, it worked.

"Miles Davis?" Hyunjin yelled. He'd climbed up on the rocks to properly face down the congregation of poked-up heads that had gathered before him, a whole backpack full of discarded records and cassettes.

"Toss it here!" Someone- a samebito named Robert, of all things - shouted. He caught the cassette with sharp shark's teeth.

"Cher?"

"I'm open!" yelled an online.

From the other side of the isle, atop the roof of the house, he could hear Yeji shrilly yelling names along with him.

"Genesis?" Yeji called, holding up a record.

"Over here, over here!" Keone, a taniwha, responded, jumping like a dolphin when it was Frisbeed over to them.

She fished out the next cassette, physically gagging. "*Ugh*, Jinyoung, why did you even *get* this?"

"Doreen made a request- she and her husband's anniversary's coming up," replied Jinyoung. He had taken to the sea doling out the other necessities that monsters had written down on his list. "Gotta give the people what they want."

Rolling her eyes, Yeji held it up to the sun. "Bob Dylan?"

"Tell your brother I said thank you!" called up Doreen, a sitcom grandmother who happened to have a mermaid's tail from the waist down.

Chuckling to himself, Hyunjin pulled the next cassette out of his bag. "John Denver?"

"Wait!" yelled Jinyoung. "Save it for us!"

"Why?"

"You'll see!"

"That's really unspecific." But back into the bag it went, replaced with another. "Donna Summer?" A vodyanoy was held up by some scaly-armed entity like a demonic baby Jesus. "Go long!" The cassette was overhanded out to the waves, and he was thrown up as a living football.

Later that night, the moon climbing high, they sat around the bonfire of burning sea glass, just the three siblings with the flames playing in shadows over their faces, listening to the John Denver cassette Jinyoung had promised was worth keeping, to the song Jinyoung strummed on the acoustic guitar he'd found on his first trip out to the States.

*"You fill up my senses, like a night in a forest,"**

"Like the mountains in springtime,"

"Like a walk in the rain,"

Hyunjin and Yeji wrapped themselves in old blankets, Thermos cups of instant hot chocolate warming them to the bone. The breeze kept moving to meet the highest branches of the juniper trees, and the water kept rising to meet the shoreline, and all the pieces were back in place.

"You fill up my senses,"

"Come fill me again."

When the grandfather clock in the living room chimed midnight, Yeji and Jinyoung went up to bed; that or launching into another late night book club discussion about Toni Morrison. Hyunjin let them go with the excuse that he would clean up after them- which he would, but later. Right now, with his sketchbook in hand, and the moonlight in place of a lamp, he had other things on his mind.

Sneaking through the dunes, pencil between his teeth, he climbed to the top of the oldest and strongest juniper by the rocks to the spot

where the branches were so conveniently placed that they provided both stable seating and back support. Brushing a couple branches out of the way, he tucked the leaves into spots where they'd stay, where they framed the moon in a triangle that looked so unintentional that any bird or moonbeam or wayward siren could have found it that way.

Humming Annie's Song, Hyunjin whipped out his pencil and touched it to his pad, tracing the shape of an adder's stone.

He could have listened to the crashing waves for hours, a repetitive symphony that retreated and doubled back with the same gentle sound, losing himself in time with the scene he was shaping out, if the soft *thump* of a heavy weight in the sand hadn't interrupted.

"What the-" It startled him so much his eraser jumped off the pad and into the sand. "*Shit.*" Now he *had* to climb down. "Hello?" Another shift; it could have just been the wind. "Anyone there?"

Nothing. Then a faint groan, a drag of movement. A tiny sliver of dark red.

All worry of the eraser slipped his mind. "Fuck," Hyunjin hissed, scrambling down the tree. There, on the shore, bare paces away from the boulders: the body of a young man, clothed in the blue sailor's uniform of the navy. Streaking from his torso, staining the sand, was an ugly trail of blood. "Hey!" He ran to him, dropped to his knees and hauled him up by the shoulders. "Hey. Hey, are you alright?"

Looking at him up close, he was younger than Hyunjin had thought-too young to be any kind of soldier. His face, still dripping with seawater and grains of sand, was made all up of delicate, boyish features: oval jaw, rounded nose, soft, blue-tinted lips. It wasn't just the moonlight making his skin pale: it was the cold of the night air, the ocean from which he'd crawled out of, the blood he was losing with every heartbeat. His dark eyes just barely registered Hyunjin's face. "Who... where..."

"It's okay, it's okay. You're safe." He draped the soldier's arm around his shoulder, dragged him up to a slumping sit against the rocks. The name tag on his lapel read *Choi Soobin*. "Soobin. Soobin- that's you, right?" The soldier tried to nod. "Yeah. Good, okay, hold on to that. Just hold on."

Soobin brought a weak hand to the spot on his abdomen, just below his ribs. "Where am I?"

"Uh..." How did you tell someone they had washed up on the Twilight Zone of the world? Soobin was far from the first sailor who'd washed ashore this island, and Hyunjin still didn't know how to answer that question. "Somewhere safe. I promise. Help is on the way, I- *oh*." Soobin's hand had fallen away, revealing the grotesque red-brown bloom he'd been hiding: a bullet wound, his scarf tied around his waist in a poorly substituted tourniquet. Hell only knew how long he'd been holding it.

Hyunjin's heart rate kicked up, racing around the tracks. "Shit. Um. God." *Don't panic*. There was the first aid kit in the bathroom. He could wake up Jinyoung- maybe he could get Soobin back to the outside world in time for proper treatment. "It's- it's okay. I can help you." Trembling, he grabbed a ledge and started to haul himself up. "I can-"

"Don't." Soobin's hand thumped towards his, a pitiful attempt to take it. "Don't go."

"But you're- " Gulp, breath, heavy exhale. "Soobin, you're-"

"I know. I know, I-" He shuddered; the words escaped with a puff of air that the breeze stole from his lips. The light in his eyes flickered, the everything that was keeping him alive. "Stay. Don't leave me."

His hand was stained red, dropped palm down on the sand. The color in his skin was almost entirely bleached out now; he probably hadn't known warmth for hours. *Maybe this is the reason all the angels look so young*. A shot taken for the team, a wrong step off the

deck. The risk every human took at least once in their life, jumping and hoping it wasn't a cliff. This was the aftermath of a man who hadn't been caught, who had hit the ground and sustained all the damage. If there was one last wish Hyunjin could grant, it could very well be that.

He let go of the ledge, sank back down beside the soldier. "I won't," Hyunjin whispered, in the steadiest, kindest voice he could muster. "I'm right here."

Sitting there beside one another, they could've been just two guys enjoying the thirteenth hour, friends or strangers or anything else.

But Soobin released another teeth-chattering shudder, a wince at the pain that wouldn't go away. "I'm scared," he breathed out.

The dampness on his clothes had started to soak into Hyunjin's sweater. His head had almost touched his shoulder. He'd accepted his end, what else could he do, but still, the fear was present.

There was nothing Hyunjin could do to hint what could be waiting for him. There was nothing he could offer but this, some shred of comfort before his whole world froze over. *I can give him something more*, he thought. *Something beautiful to take with him into the beyond.*

He focused on the oncoming shore, hesitant seafoam creeping towards two pairs of feet, one bare, touched with magnetic sand grains, one armored with sturdy black boots. In this way, Hyunjin could put him to rest.

*"I look at you all,"**

"See the love there that's sleeping,"

"While my guitar gently weeps,"

Softly, Soobin's labored breathing slowed, eased, let go of struggle. A sound that might have been laughter, given more force.

"I look at the floor,"

"And I see it needs sweeping,"

"Still my guitar gently weeps,"

His head dropped on Hyunjin's shoulder, as if he were falling asleep.

"I don't know why nobody told you,"

"How to unfold your love,"

The puffs of breath grew quieter, more gradual, crystallizing in the cold.

"I don't know how someone controlled you,"

"They bought and sold you,"

As Hyunjin kept singing, he could feel Soobin's weight pressing down on his shoulder, the slackening of a body that knew it didn't have to fight anymore. Somewhere during the second chorus, he knew that the light in Soobin's eyes had gone out, that somewhere, lost in the lyrics, he'd heard that voice, that voice that hadn't asked him for help but for the bare minimum of companionship, whisper "thank you" before fire began to dwindle. But he kept going, the guitar strumming in his mind, the way Jinyoung played it, Yeji harmonizing in the background.

"I look from the wings,"

"At the play you are staging,"

"While my guitar gently weeps,"

From this angle, the moon truly did look like the center of a triangle, a goddess in a sea of stars. He hoped she welcomed Soobin with just as much light and grace.

"Cause I'm sitting here,"

"Doing nothing but aging,"

"Still my guitar gently weeps..."

The cycle continued again in 1975.

"Did you pack snacks?" asked Doreen from the waters.

"Yes, Dorie," Jinyoung answered, snapping his suitcase shut on the kitchen table. "You don't have to ask every time."

"I'm just making sure you're safe, dear- humans are so wary, they put razorblades in the food of strangers!"

"That's true, I read it somewhere," piped Vera, anglerfish in her arms snapping at its own light.

"But it won't happen to me." Jinyoung looked to the staircase, where Hyunjin and Yeji were watching him go. "You two? Any last requests?"

"Souvenirs," said Yeji. "Salt and pepper shakers. Shaped like the Golden Gate Bridge."

"We don't need those."

"But we *want* them," Hyunjin whined.

Jinyoung laughed. "Fine, fine. I'll carve your names into the pier."

They hugged him long and tight, breathing in the smell of warm sea salt and soap before letting go again, watching him walk out and

vanish behind the dunes, listen to the whole neighborhood poke their heads out of the water just to say goodbye, stay behind to see that train of spined black scales set out into the beyond, two tan suitcases between his teeth.

Not taking her eyes off the shore, Yeji asked, "You still haven't solved that Rubik's cube, have you."

Hyunjin sighed. "No."

"Whoever solves it first gets bragging rights when he returns."

"Bet."

And so, they went back up to their rooms, shut the doors and turned up the music, started the count of the days.

Usually Jinyoung was never out there for more than three weeks: the first checking on all those Virgin Island connections, the second seeing what was new in the US of A, and the third taking some well-deserved time for himself. If the guy knew he was being expected, he never kept you waiting long. So Hyunjin and Yeji never worried, even when none of their phone calls were answered, or when when the weather reporter claimed storm season was picking back up. He was Jinyoung, the only leviathan in the Triangle, pride of the Seven Seas. He would always find a way back to them.

So when the Sunday of the third week came and ended with an uneventful sunset, Hyunjin and Yeji jilted on the shore, they shrugged it off.

"He probably got held back," suggested Yeji. "Tourists swarm all over those salt and pepper shakers."

They waited the day after, ending up with the same outcome.

"Maybe Doreen gave him another shitty request?" offered Hyunjin.

But then two days turned into three, and the sun had never been slower to rise.

"Okay," muttered Yeji, bleary-eyed and balanced on a boulder, her body packaged into Jinyoung's gray hoodie. "What the *fuck*."

Down below in the reef, they met neighbors with the same questions they had, questions they couldn't answer. From the field of sea grass, Doreen had seen him leave, but not return. Vera had gotten word that he'd stopped to pet somebody's eel and left. No one had a proper lead; he'd vanished and they let him, so sure that he would come back, the only summer soldier that ever did.

About a week later, Yeji shouted for Hyunjin to come up to the attic: she'd spotted a mortal-looking body approaching the shore through her telescope. They careened out of the house, letting their hopes shoot up to the clouds and fizzle out again when they saw it wasn't Jinyoung, but selkie friend Siyeon, who lived just by the border. Seaweed twining through her hair, reef rash on her arms and legs, panting hard as she dragged her seal skin behind her like a bodybag- to say she'd had a rough trip would've been an insulting understatement.

"What the hell happened to you?" Yeji asked once they'd reconvened in the dunes, wounds flushed and Hyunjin draping a dry towel around her shoulders.

"I was-" Siyeon winced- the towel had brushed one of her scrapes. "I'd heard about Jinyoung. I tried to go out the same way he did, stop in Jacksonville. I only reached the Bahamas when they stopped me."

"Who?" Hyunjin prompted gently.

"The earth monsters, who else?" The perplexion on their faces must've told her everything. "Wait, did you... not know?"

"We, um." Yeji tried clearing her throat. "We knew the attacks were ugly, but we didn't know it'd lead to something like this."

"I got away before they could do any real harm- frangipani dryads. Pretty, but damn, do they sting." Siyeon gestured to herself. "All this was just from escaping."

Of course. Hyunjin scoffed. "What're they blaming us for this time?"

"It's gone from bad to worse from all the hurricanes- especially Carmen, we all know what *that* did. Now all of them- namely monsters out of the southern coast -are saying *we're* the ones who cause all the hurricanes, the cyclones, the rainstorms that destroy their land, and everyone's just going along with it."

"*Bullshit*," Yeji seethed. "A water monster hasn't caused a hurricane since San Roque, and that was a river god!"

"They're angry, Yej. We can't pretend it's not for a good reason," said Siyeon somberly. "They're just looking for someone to take it out on."

Which meant kindhearted, compassionate Jinyoung who refused to even harm a *branch* much less tear down a forest, could potentially be facing something that he could never have caused.

That day, the siblings let her stay in Jinyoung's room to heal, hang her seal skin on the coat rack. And that night, Hyunjin and Yeji began the decade long search for their brother.

"Okay," Yeji said, spreading her hands out on the table. "Here's what we know. We know he left the way he always did."

"With plenty of witnesses to prove it," Hyunjin added.

"And he didn't tell us anything about possibly having a reason to stay longer."

"Which *obviously* he'd let us know about."

"Obviously. He wouldn't just hang us out to dry. For all we know he's looking for us right now."

"He could be anywhere right now." Her hands curled into fists, clenched in resolve. "He could be in danger."

Which means it's up to us to save the savior. "Which means we have to find him before anything else does."

And while there wasn't a lot of files or photo evidence to be found in the most mysterious pocket of ocean known to man, there was still a road that could be traced after, a road they could try their best to follow.

They took on the routes Jinyoung had taken- every possible side of the island -and dove out into the ocean without plan or path set in front of them, scouring the floor of the Triangle for anything that could possibly resemble a clue. They were neither Sherlock nor Holmes, but two equally determined beings who were picking things up as they went along, learning how to press on until the stingy shut-in gave in and let them pass through the door, how to sugarcoat their words in guileless smiles to genial phrases so even the wariest of flies could be caught with honey. Yeji's special talent was faking tears explaining just how much this case *meant* to her family, what was left of it, while Hyunjin snuck in through whatever window he could find.

"What'd you find?" Yeji asked, tears swiped once they'd swam away.

"Shipwreck trash," Hyunjin replied, and she groaned. "A couple Journey records, but probably sunken."

"Because how else would anyone find them here."

"That was the Orlando route, right?"

"On to Charleston."

It went like that all throughout the 70's, until there were no more routes left to take. When there was nothing left to do, they went back

home, fussed over the drawing board, did what normal siblings did after a couple dozen decades of living together.

"I swear to fuck, it's like- it's like you *live* to destroy my mentality," seethed Yeji.

"All I did was eat *cereal!*" Hyunjin screeched.

"Yes, the *concentrate* kind, which was discontinued last year, and for all I know, we own the last box!"

"You know I don't keep up with corporate America!"

The nereid opened a cabinet on the wall and screamed into it.

Those days became the new normal: searches till sundown with slips of madness in between, chasing after whatever bit of a something that could be called a lead. They were usually rumors of glimpses, Bigfoot photos with a silhouette that looked suspiciously like the one they had lost- flames that burned bright upon ignition, but snuffed out all too soon with nothing to keep it alive. The cycle repeated over and over, a wheel going round and round.

In the nights when they stayed up long enough, somber and weary and remembering how it used to be, they laid down in the living room and sank like two stones skipped from the shore, dropping through the surface, plunging down into the deep.

"We could've gone with him," Yeji said softly, lying across the couch. "It wasn't like we hadn't asked before."

"It wasn't like he ever let us before," Hyunjin shot back, sprawled over the floor next to her, hand covering his eyes. "He always said it was too dangerous, that there was-"

"- *too much we didn't understand*," she finished with him, voice wired tight as the strings of a viola. "We could've *insisted*. We could've

went with him. We could've gone with him, no matter what happened. Even if something happened, we'd be gone together."

"Would either of us've known what was going to happen? We didn't *know*, Yeji."

"We could've tried." A hard, stifled sniff. "We could've woken the fuck up and left." The dam she'd rebuilt was breaking, water seeping through again. "We could've stayed with him, we could've..."

"Hey." Hyunjin sat up, swept her into a hug neither of them were strong enough to refuse. "We didn't know, Yej. We didn't know." He buried his head in his shoulder as his own tears started to grow. "We couldn't have."

The neighbors talked about them, whispers floating through the reef. *They've gone crazy, the two of them. Every day they go out. They haven't stopped looking for almost ten years.* And they didn't ask questions, stop at their door, offer their condolences as they had in the beginning. They just let them go, let the days pass, old cassettes and records spinning on and on. There was nothing new to listen to anymore.

Year of '85, it seemed like all that might actually change.

They'd moved on the the Florida end of the triangle, scoping out the coast of Georgia. Just the night before, they'd camped out under a roof of coral, the closest they'd ever come to the border. "If this doesn't work," Yeji had sworn, "we're going out."

They stuck to the ocean floor like a troop of barnacles, turning over every piece of loose rock or broken-off coral or washed up junk like it might be treasure, tossing it over their shoulders when they came up with nothing.

"I'm gonna check out over here," Hyunjin called, drifting over to an eel's cave. "Maybe it's a forager."

"Good luck," Yeji replied absently, only sparing him a second of a glance. A minorly amused smirk pulled at her mouth. "Try not to get electrocuted."

"Come on, it doesn't look like it's home."

"Remember when you said the same thing about that barracuda?"

"We don't talk about Randy, Yeji."

"You still have the bite mark on your right forearm."

He flipped her off with that same arm, not even pausing to see her laugh. "Happy hunting," he said, careful not to make any quick movements. "Dickhead."

While Yeji contented herself with poking around the anemones, Hyunjin shone his flashlight into the cave, getting an eyeful of the shy mussels living inside, shut tight. "Must not entertain much," he muttered to himself. Really, if these motherfuckers only bred once in their whole lives, then this one must have been waiting until the very end to clean up their act and start their search. This was a bachelor pad if he'd ever seen one. "Is this what humans call neckbeards?"

Hyunjin swam in deeper, shining his flashlight into the crevices, sweeping the dust out of the way. As he felt around, he found more and more moss around the edges. "If I find a baby manatee in here, I'm gonna flip my shit like all those drunk soldiers who thought they were mer-"

His fingers found a smooth surface, metal, but paper thin. *Vinyl*. "What the *hell*?" He moved his hand down, found the rim, slid it carefully out of the cave. When it caught under his flashlight, Hyunjin could have cried: a *record*. An honest-to-fuck, sunken, unharmed record. *Washup of the month*. It wasn't even anything that good, just a Mama's & The Papa's from the 60's, but-

Wait.

He tossed the record aside, letting it float into the sand as he dug back into the cave, wiped the moss off the walls, reached out to find another slip of vinyl, another record that lead to another, and another, and another, until he held a fan of five different records in his hands. Reading from left to right, two from '66, one from '71, one more from '73, and the last one was a Queen record, *A Night At The Opera*. Released in 1975. "Yeji!"

"What?"

"Get over here! Look, look!"

She drifted over with the leisure of a sea slug. He pulled her the rest of the way. "Jeez- what is it?"

"Look at these!" Hyunjin shoved the fan of records in her face. "What are they?"

"Records."

"*Exactly!* How would these end up at the bottom of the ocean? By the very *edge* of the Bermuda border?"

"More human stupidity?"

"*Think*, Yeji! Who would just happen to leave records at this place? Who *else* could it possibly be?"

He didn't even have to say the name; it was all they'd been thinking for a decade. Yeji took in a breath calmly, shakily. "What're you thinking?"

"Look at the dates." Hyunjin pointed at each one. "Save for the ones from the '60's, they're all recent. '70, '71, and precisely '75." He shook the records in front of her blank, contained gaze. "This is *evidence*. He made it to the States- he was coming *back* for us! He didn't just leave us behind. He was trying to get home! These

records, more than anything we've ever found, means he could be out there somewhere!"

Yeji stared at the records like she was trying to unspool them with her eyes. Within them was something calculated, almost cold.

"Alright then," she said finally. "Let's go."

Hyunjin backtracked through everything he'd said, trying to figure out where he'd pinned a location. "Where?"

"Out there. Beyond the border."

Yeji didn't flinch, didn't even blink. Absurdly, Hyunjin felt a laugh building up inside. "Why would we do that?"

"It's the one thing we haven't tried in all this time. Why not do it now?"

"Because-" Because they didn't know what was out there. They hadn't mapped out the Gulf of Mexico the way they had here. At home, where it was safe. "What if he's in these borders? What if he's staying somewhere? What if- what if he's with someone we know?"

"Why are you trying to get out of this?"

"I'm not! I'm not, I just. Think maybe, y'know, we should. Cover our bases."

"For the millionth time?"

"Yeji, come on. If these records are in this good condition, this close to home, he could be nearby."

"*Hyunjin*," she groaned. "Come on."

"What's wrong? You've always backed me up on this."

"Jin, I-" She scoffed, cut herself off. "I can't do this anymore."

"Do- do *what?*"

"*This!*" Yeji waved her arms at the records, the coral, the everything around them. "This whole case. I'm done, okay? I'm-"

"No." He couldn't hear her say it. She couldn't possibly be saying it.

"Hyunjin-"

"*No!*" Hyunjin yelled. "After all this time? After we've gotten this close? He could still be out there- you can't give up now!"

"What the *fuck* are you calling '*close*,' Hyunjin? We've been close for *ten years!*" Her shout was so loud it scared off a whole school of pinfish. "Don't you think, with everything we've done, we would've found him in that time? That, hell, maybe *he* would've found his way back to *us?*"

"And you think he isn't?"

"Open your fucking *brain*, Hyunjin. Think about the *hundreds of times* he's managed to come from there and back the same time every year. If he wasn't able to make it back all those years ago, it was because he couldn't."

"He wouldn't." Hyunjin shook his head. "He loved us, Yeji. He wouldn't let anything stop him from getting back to us."

"Just *accept it!* He's *gone*, Hyunjin, and a couple of *fucking* records aren't going to change that."

Hyunjin felt the weight of the entire ocean falling hard on his shoulders, like the walls of the Red Sea had collapsed over him. "You can't mean that."

"You know it's true."

"You can't say *that!*" he roared, more helpless than angry. "You'll be just like everyone else who gave up on him."

"Fine. They're right."

He stared at his sister- the shape of her eyes, the strong furrowed brows, the sharp set of her jaw -and tried to recognize who he saw wearing them. "Hasn't this meant anything to you? Don't you *want* to get him back?"

"Haven't you ever considered that we *can't*?" The stubborn spike in her voice jabbed at his heart. "He's always told us about the shit that goes on in the mortal world, the monsters that hate us. Maybe- maybe something got to him. Maybe he *was* trying to get back to us, and was caught off guard."

"He knows this place just as well as we do. He'd never be caught off guard."

"Well, maybe something followed him? The same fucks who took those pictures?"

"But who would make an enemy of *Jinyoung*?"

"*Jesus*." He almost thought that was her answer until she said, "Look. I get that you don't want to let go. I don't love him any less than you do. But this- this whole *thing* -it's all we've been doing. We haven't *lived*. Jinyoung would want-"

"Don't talk about him like he's fucking *dead*."

"Well, maybe he is!"

A nail drove into the coffin. "Don't say that."

"It could be true."

She didn't want to believe it either. He didn't care. "You're scared," he seethed. "You're giving up because you're *scared*."

Her voice came back with a sting, with a bitter defensiveness that Hyunjin knew lived in him too. "*I'm* scared?"

"You'd rather think he left us, that- that he *abandoned* us instead of believing that there's some chance we could still get to him even years later."

"Then why don't you go out past the border? Prove me wrong."

It was another one of her challenges for him. But this one meant everything. It meant opening up to a whole world he'd purposely kept away from and seeing just what it could throw at him, a world that could have ripped his brother away from him with cruel hands, a world that could still tear him apart if he gave it the chance.

The look on Yeji's face wasn't disappointment, but tired, froze-over fury. "Coward," she spat, acid lacing her words.

Hyunjin could feel the tears burning in the back of his throat, his eyes, pounding at his skull, threatening to break the floodgates. "So what," he said hoarsely. "Maybe the wrong person left."

It was the single most damning sentence he'd ever spoken.

Yeji's eyes sliced right through him. He wouldn't forget that look for the next dozen years. "Maybe."

If he hadn't been so angry, if he had been able to see beyond the red that was starting to clog his vision, that would have been the part where he would console them both. Instead, he thought viciously that Yeji was wrong. It couldn't possibly have been over, not when it hadn't been over for ten years. He'd be waiting when she came back. He'd watch her go just to prove it.

The last thing Hyunjin saw of his sister was her arctic seaglass eyes. Her trembling scowl. The slowed whip of her hair, fire that persisted undersea as she turned around and shot like a bullet through the murky haze of the border.

Hyunjin clutched his records, swallowed the tightness in his throat, and swam the other way.

He sent Yeji one bottle the first hour. By sunset, two. By nightfall, none. He'd spent so much of his life yammering, always having someone to listen to him on the other end, that he didn't know the signs when they didn't want to hear him anymore.

He forced himself to only run over to the shore once every two hours instead of once an hour. Once, he got wrapped up in a landscape drawing of the house and realized he hadn't checked in hours, and raced to the shore with a hiccuping, desperate hope that Yeji would be walking out to meet him, dripping saltwater and familiar curses. She never was.

So, instead, for the next three days:

The first night spent in his room, pacing so many furious laps with bare feet that his heels blistered.

A Rubik's cube smashed into the bathroom mirror, over and over and over until the cubes burst apart.

Two and a half different dreams of happier times, two reminders of what he'd already lost, broke through with a feverish gasp.

For the first time in his whole life, he couldn't lose himself in music, not a single song he listened to. It all sounded cheap, tinny in his ears- it wasn't like they'd ever been his to own, anyways. He didn't even know where they came from, couldn't even picture the place. He let the records spin on, flipped tape after tape, not even caring which, just something to drown out the brewing storm in his mind, anything.

It was somewhere on the morning of the third day; he'd thrown the Suzi Quatro tape to the ground and replaced it with the next cassette on the stack he'd piled next to him on the living room couch. Hyunjin closed his eyes, convinced that maybe, just maybe the waters had calmed, when the tranquil acoustic introduction of a guitar strummed through the cassette speaker, snapping them open again.

A flash of rage jerked him up on his feet, grasping the handle of the speaker with an angry hand and throwing it to the ground, watching it clatter unharmed, hear the deluge of Annie's Song spill through the entire house.

"You fill up my senses, like a night in a forest..."

And that, Hyunjin decided, throat squeezing tight, *"the mountains in springtime"* clouding his ears, was officially too fucking much.

The sky had dulled to an emotionless slate gray, clouds churning over the blazing white speck that was the sun. The water had gone inky blue and choppy, frothy caps on small waves rising and falling in short bursts. He dove into them headfirst, zipping through the neighborhood and straight for the border after what was left of his family.

"Yeji?" Hyunjin called, checking around every corner, every shadow, running into rocks where he wasn't looking. *"Yeji!"* He wove in between and out of reefs, seaweed stalks. "Yej, I'm sorry!"

Swimming on, he found no sign of her, only schools of fish and other creatures bulleting past. All of them seemed to be going to opposite way- even the manatee whose rear flipper slapped him in the face didn't pause to apologize, just kept going.

"Out of the way!" A girl shouted, and it was Keone the taniwha, clinging to the back of a hippocampus.

It was enough to slow him down. "What the-" Looking around, Hyunjin stopped completely. *"Fuck."*

Following her at breakneck speed was everyone he'd ever met in the Triangle: Siyeon zipping up her selkie skin and rocketing around the bend, samebito Robert holding a medieval treasure chest, Vera and all eight of her goddamn anglerfish, the ondine and a miniature clutching her hand who might've been her little sister. Even that crazy vodyanoy was cradled in the arms of what looked to be a

superhumanly mutated reptile man, crashing through the sand while he screamed, "*Gloriya! Gloriya!*"

These beings had made their homes in the Bermuda nothingness ages before he'd even come into existence. There was nothing in the world that could have made them leave. "Where are you guys going?"

"*Hyunjin!*" Doreen the merwoman came barreling into his arms. Strapped to her back with shipwreck twine and kelp looked to be everything she owned. "What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"I'm looking for Yeji, she- she didn't come home. Where are *you* going, what's happening?"

"The hurricane! Why else?"

"Hurricane? What hurricane?"

"The one we've been preparing for for weeks! The biggest one of the year! Haven't you seen the signs?"

Weeks? The past five weeks, he and Yeji had been chasing a navy crash route in hopes of finding Jinyoung holed up there. "I didn't know."

"Oh, dear-" In the distance, Doreen's husband called her name. "I'm sorry. Truly, I am. Come, come on, we have to go-"

"No." Hyunjin pulled away, pushed ahead. "I have to find my sister."

"Hyunjin-"

"Go, Dorie. I'll be okay. Go."

A look of pain and pity pasted to her face, she left without looking back. And Hyunjin turned around and did the same.

The farther he went, the more monsters he saw fleeing, tempting him to do the same. Every time he refused, and it became harder it became to continue, to fight back, to even see. The tide had turned to cold, magnetic quicksand, trying to draw him in. The waves had begun to grow stronger, and Hyunjin could feel their upward pull lifting his body, dragging him up and under. With every crash, it sounded like an all-consuming cacophony of cymbals, erupting volcanos, explosions of chaos from every end.

His eyes had begun to burn, to ache like they wanted to be purged from his skull, his limbs weakening against a power he had been so convinced he understood. He couldn't even open his mouth to sing, to tame the beast. If he did, the saltwater would pry open his lips, flood his mouth and nose, force its way down his throat until he could taste nothing else. So Hyunjin swam on, chasing the chance that he would at least find his sister in the storm, all out of the fear that he wouldn't have to be alone for another moment.

No, it was more than that. It was fear, fear that he wouldn't ever see her again, but it was also heartache, grief, anger at himself for letting not the one, no, not just one, but the *two* only beings in the world who knew him inside and out, who could decipher his moods and know which song he wanted to play, who could take him and his worst and deserve him at his best and spend a whole life with him and not get sick of it, just because of the one moment Hyunjin had taken them for granted. He needed to find them. He needed to hold them tight on solid ground and never let them go again. He needed to play them the records he'd found. After all this time, he still needed to say he was sorry.

I'm sorry, Hyunjin thought, picturing their faces as he did, hearing himself say it. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

He was so busy fighting, so busy apologizing that he didn't even feel it when he burst through the border.

For a moment, the storm was put on pause. Hyunjin was able to blink the red out of his eyes, float in blue-green space, turn around,

look at the life he'd left behind and think, *Did I just do that?*

Just for the hell of it, just to be sure, he changed his course upward, kicked his way towards the sky, gulped a breath of salt-swamped air when he broke the surface.

Behind him, his house- his shitty, Gothic church rip-off house full of trinkets and memories and stolen music -had vanished from view. Up ahead, just a bumpy sliver of green, a little ways away from almost but there: the coast of Georgia. Curving into Florida on the left. Flanked by Alabama on the right. Just like Jinyoung, just like Yeji, Hyunjin had made it.

The crashing sheets of water interrupted his moment of victory.

Wind screamed in his ears, echoing in the background of the hurricane, which had come so close without him even knowing, so close he could see it. Coming for him.

Up above, blue as blood and poised to strike like the merciless hand of God on his fortieth day of his flood, a wave he hadn't seen rise, tall as the mountains in the horizon, grand as the angels in his dreams.

A hazy flicker of a moment in his mind, a memory: Yeji on the highest branch of the juniper tree, knee tucked up while the other dangled below, breeze flowing through her hair, holding the pose so he could sketch it from the ground. The echo of her laugh, the only time she ever broke character.

But then the wave crashed down over Hyunjin before he could swim away, dragging him away and under, plunging his mind into black.

Hyunjin couldn't feel it, but he knew he was drifting.

What little consciousness he had faded into a stream of fractured scenes that swelled and erratically faded. He dreamed he was

conducting a discordant orchestra with a broken pencil. He dreamed of his island home, doors locked, unwilling to let him in. He dreamed of a song.

He dreamed once, briefly, of the reef, drained of all water, everyone gathered among friends. He saw Siyeon holding hands with Keone. Doreen slow dancing with her husband. Yeji laughing at an anglerfish flopping about, gasping for air. Above them pattered the ominous *drip, drip, drip* of rain.

Jinyoung appeared next to him, hand on his shoulder. “*Look,*” he said, pointing at the ground, where pebbles of seaglass popped up from the sand.

“*Don’t you hear it?*” Hyunjin tried to say. “*Something’s coming.*” He opened his mouth: the whole ocean crashing down, then nothing.

When he finally did come back to life, the first thing he felt: air. Frigid on his wet skin, wet hair, wet clothes. There was sand in his hands. On his cheek. In his ear. Water was retreating from his legs, freeing him from its grasp. Seagulls squawked around his ears, blending with the crashing waves.

Woozily, in the back of his dazed, jumbled mind, Hyunjin thought: *Washup of the month.*

With tremorous hands, he forced his fingers to curl into the sand, drag his worthless, weathered body upward; it moved in fits and starts, trying to rally the limbs into obedience, shuddering with cold. *You just made it through a hurricane, dipshit.* This much he could do. This much he *had* to do.

He must have made it a third of the way up the shore without hearing the whistling; he only paid it any mind when it turned into a young man’s shout of, “Who’s there?” which followed with a breathless “Oh, *Jesus,*” and pounding footsteps on sand.

Before Hyunjin knew it, he was being hauled up the rest of the way, turned on his back, rested on someone's lap. "Are you alright?"

"Who..." Hyunjin blinked groggily; hazy black dots were sweeping his vision. The stranger's shadow was blocking the sun. "What..."

"It's okay, I'm not gonna hurt you. You're okay." As his vision started to clear, he made out the face of his savior: worried dark eyes, milk-pale skin, wavy brown curls, full lips stuck in a frown. "You're safe now."

Hyunjin had spent his entire life around beings he knew. Everyone knew who ever lived in the Triangle- once they came in, they stayed for good, and to all the rest, it was like you'd never not been around. He had never met a stranger in his life.

But somehow, maybe just with the weird, oddly charming indent in his voice, he knew this was one he could trust.

"Where..." he rasped, coughing midway. His throat felt like rubbing gravel, skinned knees on asphalt. Sternly, he forced out the words. "Where am I?"

"Eldritch, Oregon. You must be a long way from home." Hyunjin didn't have the energy to tell this guy he had no idea. "Come on. Let's get you up."

Little by little, keeping hold of his hand, the stranger coaxed him up on his feet, only looking a little alarmed when he saw the coral rash on their soles. "My name's Chan," the man said. "What's yours?"

"... Hyunjin."

"Hyunjin. I've got a place in town, a place where you can rest up, heal in peace, take whatever time you need. If you want, I'll take you there now." He squeezed his hand, a comforting gesture. "What do you say?"

What do I say? The only home he'd ever known was out in some forbidden in the ocean. He was in a town whose name, even after decades of studying the globe in his living room, he'd never come across. Somewhere out in the world, the only people he'd ever called his family were washed up on some other shore, wondering where the hell he was.

What else could Hyunjin say, but: "Okay."

No Roots - Alice Merton

*Space Oddity - David Bowie

*Annie's Song - John Denver

*While My Guitar Gently Weeps - The Beatles

Upper Side Dreamin'

Chapter 21: Upper Side Dreamin'

Haha YUP that pulled us under for a good long second. But now it's time to remind us of the much happier present!

Skz are rooming with their ever-generous hosts Got7, and the moments that ensue are both adorable and heartfelt. Let's see just how Fortunate we are to see them on these isles.

du-du-du-du-du-du-du

Upper side dreamin' yeah

...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

If Got7 were the least bit put off by having eight guys a good chunk of them had never really met before, it didn't show. Perhaps it was the wonderful pastime of Nepotism working in Hyunjin's favor that kept them polite.

Or maybe every morning came into play with waves-crashing, birds-chirping serenity, which lasted about ten minutes until Bambam exclaimed, completely out of the blue, "Martha Stewart has a thirst trap video?"

Both floors of sleeping tenants groaned, laughter erupting from Chan and Jackson.

"*Damn it, Bambam,*" Jinyoung moaned groggily, definitely wishing the salamander would stop his morning scrolls through Instagram reels.

And so it began.

Someone's phone was slapped to the ground, and Jaebum trudged yawning into the courtyard five seconds later. The sizzle of eggs on a warm griddle crackled through the open air, undertoned with Youngjae's musical shout of, "Rise and *shine~!*"

One by one, it brought them out of their beds: Chan yawning into the shadow of his bedpost and dropping out of one of the first floor pillars, Jeongin snaking out of the five-layer burrito he'd burrowed himself into and trotting off in fox form, using Jisung's still-sleeping body as a launching pad for the stairs- Jisung, who, once he tried to roll around to see what all the fuss was about, promptly fell to the floor.

Once everyone had shuffled, vined, or halfheartedly fluttered down to the courtyard with some semblance of food in their hands, they changed course to the dining table center wing of the palace, polished ebony curved in a C and so low that throw pillows were used instead of chairs.

"No shit-talking is safe. Every word gets across," whispered Mark. "*Every. Word.*"

Yet as the sun started to peek out from behind the clouds, that became the least of their worries. In fact, it seemed as though no one at the table had disagreed on anything in their lives.

"Sorry, could we go back to the part where you said you were a *pirate?*" Jeongin called three people over to Jackson, limp wristing his spoon. "Because I can imagine you in a flowy shirt and lace-up pants."

"I say this as a completely sane being," Seungmin started, waving his piece of bacon like a wand, "but mac and cheese Oreos are the worst thing I've ever eaten, and I've once eaten a soggy goldfish off a woodchip."

"Like..." Bambam paused, conflicted. "A live goldfish?"

"No, like the cracker, Bam," said Jaebum patiently, not even looking up from his breakfast burrito bowl.

"You." Minho pointed across Chan table at Yugyeom. "You are going to die trying to backflip into a pool and hitting your head on a diving board. Don't ask me how I know, I just do." Thankfully, Yugyeom seemed to agree with that sentiment.

"And that's how you got to Holly Beach," concluded Jinyoung, who Hyunjin had just regaled of all the adventures that dotted their road trip resumé before he'd even touched his bionico.

"Take your time," said Hyunjin, calmly starting in on his blueberry bagel- a local bakery in Bridge City helped supply their needs. "I know it's a lot to process."

"Huh." Jinyoung ran that down, processed it. He leaned closer to his ear. "So which one's Jisung?"

"Jinyoung!"

"It's an innocent question!"

"Which you didn't have to *ask*. He's the blue haired one who's smiling because you said his name so damn loud."

"Oh." Jinyoung studied the spriggan across the table, chewing his cinnamon roll with poofy cheeks like a contented squirrel. "He's pretty cute, isn't he?"

"Ugghh."

The Fortunate Isles was made up of its own landscape; it was the lush, opulent paradise that swashbucklers from centuries past had only been able to dream of: a backyard of seaside cliff plains dotted with yellow wood sorrels overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Bordering its sides were vibrant flower bushes tended to by Mark himself ("He's especially proud of the pink azaleas," Jaebum informed them) which lead into verdant forests that were worth getting lost in. The one on the left was where most of their natural wildlife lived; the one on the right was where Mark and Youngjae kept their own line of herbal remedies in an old gardening shed.

"It's been used a lot more than it should be," Youngjae admitted. "But there hasn't been any fatalities yet!"

"Only until the 4th of July," muttered Jinyoung somberly.

Being a coven that came from a place where one was lucky if the sky was blue for a full three hours, it was easy for Stray Kids to embrace the sunny weather, run whooping down the eternally summer green, breathe deeply in the seasalt air, marvel at the coastal view.

"Whoa," Felix breathed out, dropping to a crouch at the edge of the cliffs. Below the waves, a school of yellowtail snappers skimmed just by the ridge of the shoreline. "You guys just see this stuff all the time?"

"Pretty much," replied Jackson, keeping watch from behind.

"Sometimes we throw a Filet-O-Fish in the ocean for the fish for fun."

"Isn't that - "

"Cannibalism? Whether or not they know it, it's also entertainment." Jackson nodded to the temple. "I know where we can get a better view."

On looking around, Felix saw that the rest of their friends were splitting off into their own little duos: Jisung and Mark skipping into

the forest, Hyunjin following Jinyoung's hesitant lead down to the other side of the isle, Chan pulling Jaebum aside. "Take me there."

Apparently, Felix hadn't been correctly mapped out the trajectory of Jackson's nod- it lead all the way up to the top of the roof. Of course he only found that out when the sprint he'd mistaken for a race to the top turned into a running leap that sprouted copper-feathered wings and soared off the ground, up past three floors and settling on the center spiral, smoothly as a leaf blown by a breeze.

"You coming?" he yelled down.

Right, Felix remembered. He didn't know. "Yeah!" he called back. "Just gonna... take the stairs."

While it did take him significantly longer than the timely flaps of two sturdy wings, Jackson was still on the rooftop waiting for him when he arrived, helping Felix seat himself properly on the roof shingles without sliding off.

"Man," Felix panted, letting his feet dangle over the edge. "I could get used to a view like this."

"You could," Jackson amended, smiling blissfully at the endless blue. "Me, I don't know if I ever will. Sixty-six years, and it just keeps getting better."

"Sixty-six? You've been here a while."

"Yup. Wasn't my choice, at first, but wouldn't you know it." A hoot of laughter sounding from the left forest brought a chuckle out of him. "Became the best thing that ever happened to me."

Felix his gaze downward; this time, it wasn't hard to pinpoint. In a tiny little clearing framed with rocks instead of trees, Jisung had found a nutria snuffling around the pond, still chewing the roots of the cattail plant in its paws, and was showing it to Mark, who was

nearly pink in the face from laughing. "How did you come across The Fortunate Isles?"

His gaze returned forlornly to the water. "My ship got shot down. Bambam found me in the water looking for salvageable furniture."

"*Shit*. Dude, actually?" Nod. "Jesus. That must've been horrible."

"It was, at the time. Should've expected it though- what with America and Vietnam getting pissed at each other and taking it out in missiles. I was just floating around, careless, when I got caught in the crossfires."

"You were okay, right?"

"Somehow. I didn't think I would be. One minute I was just falling, and the next, I was on the couch by the window, dripping all over the place while half my living room was drying out in the backyard."

"Damn." Felix wondered where that stain had come from. He had been expecting a somewhat more graphic explanation. "And how did it feel watching Titanic?"

Jackson cackled. "Little shit." He shoved a laugh out of Felix. "All I had to deal with was YugBam fucking up My Heart Will Go On and Youngjae holding back tears on *'I'm never letting go.'*"

"Are you saying you blame him?"

"Look, if it's me or Kate Winslet on a piece of driftwood in the cold ocean, I'm letting her take her chances."

"Your funeral."

"Bring a bottle of Vat 69, would you?"

Felix shot a promising finger gun. A trio of seagulls squawked overhead, chasing the clouds into the west.

"So," Jackson drummed his fingers on the tiles. "Why didn't you fly up here?" Felix's stomach twisted, like one of the birds had flown into it. "I thought that was something angels could do."

"Well, not this one." *Just say it fast, make it quick.* It was common knowledge, had been for years. "The thing is I, kind of. Can't."

"Can't? What do you mean, 'can't?'"

What everyone means when they say can't. "I mean, I could, but. It's just been pretty much impossible for a while."

"Seriously?" A somber nod. "And how long's a while in this scenario?"

Normally, Felix would have a minute to think about it. But since the past month, the memory was fresh. "About twenty-two years."

"*Twenty-two?* I can't even go a day." He smiled tersely, scanned the sky for any distracting birds. "Did something... happen?"

Where to even begin? Probably not that far back- Jackson didn't need to know everything. "Nothing much. Well, I got personally shoved out the pearly gates for insubordination, but we're chilling." Jackson looked deeply concerned for his sanity. "We weren't then, of course, but we are now."

Jackson sat back and thought on that, as if he were on his ship again outsmarting fickle winds. "And you haven't flown at all since then?"

"I tried." Felix tilted his head down, swept the hair off the nape of his neck. "But it's no use."

Where the knot of his neck met his spine was a tattoo of white angel wings- the size of a fist, nothing big, just enough to hide under the collar of a shirt. It would've been flawless if it weren't for the scar that sliced through, jagged pink skin marring flesh.

Jackson looked it over, intrigued. "Are those your wings?"

"Resting beneath the skin. Could still be there, I wouldn't know." Felix raked his hair back again. "I used to be able to just *feel* it. Like another arm or something, that I could trust it." He could still remember how it felt- the rush of the air on his skin, the weightlessness, the freedom. "Ever since I fell, I haven't felt anything like that."

"Not to point out the obvious, but falling from heaven sounds..." Felix prompted him to go on. Jackson sucked in his teeth. "Pretty traumatic."

"You get over it with time. Mostly."

"And you're certain that scar is the reason you can't fly?"

"Given I could fly perfectly well before it got fucked, yeah." The scheming look clouded over Jackson's face. "Are you saying that's... not the reason?"

"Well, I'm no expert on the subject," the griffin clarified. "Jaebum and I are the only aerial monsters I really know, and we haven't had any problems like that, but. I don't know. Youngjae's had cases like this before."

"Cases like what?"

"Aerial monsters who came to us after an accident, convinced that a bad attack made them lose their wings. Usually they had some baggage leftover that they hadn't unpacked, but instead of doing that, they shoved it down."

Felix blinked. "Are you saying I gaslighted myself?" *Does that make me a girlboss?*

"I'm saying that *maybe*- even after twenty-two years, after your scar has healed, there's still something in there unconsciously holding

you back. You don't have to know what it is right now, but if you find out, maybe you could, potentially, get your wings back."

If Jackson was right, there was a number of moments Felix could have chosen. The day the angels threw him out. The crap he'd heard Zico talking on him. The feeling of helplessness in his black sand dream. The last night he and Eric had spent together. *So many ghosts*. It couldn't be that easy.

But the image of the birds came back to him. Even if Felix hadn't lived it in years, he still remembered what it was like to be among them, to live that life and see the world with the simple beauty of a birds eye view.

Maybe that was what made him, against whatever better judgement he had, ask, "You think so?"

Jackson hummed, as if asking the question to himself. "What's that one saying? 'When God closes a door, he opens a window?'" Carefully, Felix nodded. "Then think about it like that. Might not be a proper opening, but an opening all the same."

"But what if the window's bolted?"

"Then break the fucking glass." In Jackson's smile, his wayfaring determination glimmered close behind, showing him a glimpse of the pirate who'd sunk the Rex, someone Felix could baselessly find himself believing. "If there's anything this world has taught me, it's that there's always a way out."

It took almost fifteen minutes of Jinyoung leading him step by gingerly, panic-inducing step down the stairs, but Hyunjin finally made it down to the shore.

"See?" Jinyoung took his hand on the sand. "Told you you wouldn't die."

"It'd be a waste to kill me off this early," Hyunjin admitted. "I just got back to you yesterday- we still got catching up to do."

The capsized guest greeting pine made for a suitable, solitary bench; even the approaching turtle knew to turn around. Whether they sensed the presence of two monsters or simmering awkwardness, anyone could've gotten the hint.

"So." Jinyoung twiddled his thumbs. "How've, um. How've you been?"

Of all the open-ended questions to ask at a reunion. Hyunjin tapped his fingers on the bark. "Well, to sum up the past forty-seven years? Good. Living, y'know, that's usually something to be grateful for."

"True. And all that time's been spent with your coven?"

"Yup. Took us a while to get together, but. Been smooth sailing so far."

"Cool." Jinyoung could have very well been mentally flipping through a pamphlet of conversation starters. "What about Yeji?"

Just at her name, Hyunjin winced. "I don't know. We, um. Got separated."

"Separated? How?"

"A lot happened while you were gone." It was all he could bring himself to say.

The revelation seemed to shake up whatever questionnaire Jinyoung had resigned himself to. His composure faltered, set a quaver in his voice. "So, in Portland-"

"Did you really not know I was out there?"

"Jin."

"I know, I know, I just." Hyunjin cut off in a sigh, flopped a hand helplessly at the surf. "You got two members who've known Chan and Minho personally for ages. They visit once or twice every couple of years. You've never gotten curious as to who they were seeing?"

"They never really said anything about the other members, so no."

"You said there wasn't a day you didn't bring me up! Couldn't you have provided some details?"

"And there wasn't! I love them, but it's Bambam and Yugyeom we're talking about."

"So you'd hear nothing about the ocean monster with eyes just like yours, who just *happened* to have two missing siblings?"

"No, okay? I didn't."

"Then what've you been doing all this time?" There were no boundaries, no oceans between them anymore. All the questions Hyunjin had been saving for the past four decades were firing off.

"We looked for you for *ten years*, Jinyoung. What brought you so far away? Why didn't you try to come back?" The last was a barb buried so deep Hyunjin had convinced himself it was gone, but he dug it out anyway. "Did you even look for us at all?"

Act dropped, Jinyoung looked tired already. Hesitant. Wounded. "Ten years?"

"Until Yeji called quits and left the Triangle. And I went after her and got hit by Hurricane Gloria."

"I didn't know."

"It doesn't make a difference now." *Bitterness won't make anything better*, Hyunjin reminded himself, easing up. "Just tell me. So I can know."

"Do you really want to hear all of it now?"

"I think almost fifty years of waiting is enough for anyone."

He saw a glimmer of the ice in his soul flash in Jinyoung's eyes; the chill of the Arctic must have had some hand in crafting them. But in them, he could see the glaciers melting.

"It was supposed to be an ordinary trip- I never meant to leave you and Yeji for longer. I was on my way back from San Juan when a hurricane hit- Eloise. It swept me off course and dumped me in Louisiana. Jaebum just happened to be passing through."

"So it wasn't some Little Mermaid shit where you made him fall for you on sight at a beach?"

"Do I really strike you as an Ariel?"

"In the skin of a Prince Eric. I heard you listening to the At Last* record for hours straight the week you brought it home."

Jinyoung slipped him a side-eye. "At first, I didn't want to go with him. Tried to run away." Hyunjin snickered into his hand. "But the hurricane was still moving up, and most of the stuff from my suitcases were gone, and I wasn't close enough to the water to make a route back. So, under the promise that he'd help me get back on my feet, I let him fly me out here." Hyunjin innocently turned his face the breeze to hum Test Drive.* "Do you want me to finish or not?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" His brow cocked. "Fine, kidding."

"Well, believe it or not, I didn't snap at the chance to leave you and your sister. I tried for years to get back to you- *years*. I was the last member of Got7 to get to The Fortunate Isles. They helped me. Went out in search parties and drew maps." Jinyoung perched his elbows on his knees, slumped forward. He chuckled, venturing back. "This place in the 70's. Mark liked those contemporary paintings, and Yugyeom got an obsession with weirdly shaped cacti. I used the pool table as my desk- Jaebum made Jackson move it up to my room."

He laughed fondly, like he was watching it happen again. "There were days when I wouldn't leave my room. Wouldn't see anyone but Youngjae, who always brought my food. Or one of Bambam's cats—those fuckers could climb up to Olympus." His smile faded somberly, gray fog stealing in. "I thought once I was through with my research, I'd leave. Thank them, be on my way, and let that be it."

Hyunjin could hear his own actions echoing back at him: in the jingle of the room key to 25, Chan's welcoming smile, Minho's sly wit, Changbin's gruff hospitality, Jisung's morning tide voice, soft and lulling: *"He likes the way I stare."*

The siren ducked his head, focused intently on the creeping seafoam at his feet, trying to pretend it didn't look like a mirror.

"It was never supposed to be an issue," Jinyoung continued hoarsely. "I never meant to fall in love with anything here." *No one ever does*, thought Hyunjin. But his brother took a different course. "For the first time, *I* was the one depending on someone else, and it was *okay*. There wasn't an— an entire *village* breathing down my back, counting on me to be the future, to be their hero. I was getting instead of giving, feeling the way I'd dreamed of feeling my whole life, and I hadn't even gone searching for it. By some twist of fate, it just happened to me. Before I even knew it."

His voice, starting as the rumbling beginning of a stampede, stabilized, slowed to a tremor. "On the fifth year, I left in the night for the Triangle. It was the only way I could do it without saying goodbye. Jaebum, he'd." Jinyoung shook his head; there was anger in the motion. "He'd told me he loved me, just hours before, when everyone else had gone to bed. By then, I knew how I felt, but I didn't think it mattered. Not when I had another family to get back to." The surf approached Jinyoung's toes tentatively; the leviathan in him glared it into retreat. "I'd passed the border. I was just above Doreen's place when I saw you and Yeji through the living room window. She was crying, and you were comforting her. Last I'd been present to see, it had always been the other way around." His fingers curled around a branch, strangling it in his hand. "You thought I'd left

you. That I was gone for good- both of you. You thought it was your fault. And I didn't know how I could just show up and explain that it wasn't. Fill a hole that had become too big for me. Go back to the way things were. So I returned to The Isles. And when I did, Jaebum was waiting for me." When Jinyoung released the branch, it groaned in relief. "I told him I loved him too. And I didn't look back."

Jinyoung glanced at Hyunjin, waited until he looked back. "There was never a moment of any day where I didn't think of you and Yeji, the life we had. That I didn't wonder what you were doing without me. But I'd found something new- something I hadn't known I'd been looking for, and hoped that if I managed to make it out, you could too. And I'd meet you on the shore again and see what we'd all learned."

All his life, Hyunjin had seen his brother through a rose colored lens: a film hero on the silver screen, a valiant knight squared up to the dragon, pure gold on every limb. Now, he could see him in all his shades- fleshed out, finally mortal, a knight who'd fallen for his dragon instead of slaying it. *Maybe this is what he wanted the whole time*, he realized. *Just for all of us to grow on our own*. "Well, that explains a lot."

Jinyoung laughed; it was more of a relieved one than a *yippy-little-shit* one. "I'm glad it did."

"I mean, it is good to know you didn't just up and leave us, but. About the pressure, too. You never told us that was how you felt."

"That was because I didn't really know I felt that way," Jinyoung admitted bashfully. "I'd kept you and Yeji from coming with me because I thought it'd keep you safe. Maybe I just didn't want you to know."

"Took you long enough to say." Hyunjin watched the tide bring in a new crop of tiny shells. "Still, I get it. At least what you said about Got7." He smiled at the hermit crab that crawled away in one. "When Chan found me, I was so hellbent on finding something out of my

reach that I'd lost myself in it. They... they made me remember what it was like to be part of a family again."

"I'm happy someone could." Jinyoung's grin, though wide, was wavering; he looked even more nervous than he had before. "But now that we've found each other... maybe this time around we don't let go?"

Hyunjin couldn't have been happier had he suggested they raid Louisiana of its whole record collection. "Of course."

"I have to admit, when you told me you were taking me somewhere down under, I thought you had something more nefarious in mind," mused Minho.

"Come on, you've given no reason to kill you yet," said Bambam, grinning over his shoulder. "And I add the yet as a compliment."

"You do know your audience."

As much as they joked, the sea caves didn't look like a spot for murder. Just like everything on the island, it was its own natural beachcomber type of beauty, the kind that stock photographers scoped out the most picture-perfect locations to find. The water lapped at their ankles, at the little crabs that washed in with the tide. Each cave was connected in a network which carried the beach and the entire temple above.

"These were here when I got here, safe anytime," said Bambam, ambling easily under the arches. "Although Yugie says there's a Barbary pirate ghost wandering around somewhere, mumbling about Jefferson's mac and cheese."

"Poor bastard."

"We all go out somehow." A flash around a corner; a hiss of smoke with a blaze of fire, and Bambam vanished. "All the shit going down's

been so serious, I never got to ask."

Either Bambam had apparated into an urban legend hallucination, or Minho had wandered into some secret labyrinth he had neglected to mention. *Damn, not another one.* "Ask what?"

"What brought the reclusive coven of Stray Kids out of Eldritch in the first place."

Minho rolled his eyes. "Says the guy who's lived on an island since '37."

"The only times I ever hear of you guys going anywhere is when there's a job- usually not even out of town!" Bambam's voice echoed from every which way, circling down the caves. "At least we go out in time for the Second Line on Sundays."

"It was a collective agreement that we needed to get out of the motel for a bit," Minho admitted. "But it was Chan's idea."

A spiraling laugh. "Of course it was."

"Sure, the whole trip to the edge of the world thing sounded ambitious, but it wasn't like we had anything else going on. I still don't know where he got it- must've been swimming around in his head."

"Who knows where Chan gets his ideas?"

"You're the best friend."

"You're the boyfriend."

"Touché." He could see the line where the ocean had eroded the sediment over the years. "Well, it wasn't just that."

"You know you can't just say that and not tell me."

"Yes, yes, I know how you love a tale." *Even if it isn't the best one.* "A month ago, we got duped by a skinwalker who disguised himself as a Wiccan to infiltrate and pit us against each other. Wasn't fun."

"Damn. Did everyone make it out okay?"

"Yeah." Unless he counted the fact that it almost worked. "He reminded us of the the things we'd been running from- brought back both Kai and Irene."

"What a coincidence."

"This whole thing was supposed to get our minds off it all, but, wouldn't you know, it followed us back."

"Past has that tendency." Bambam could have been crawling on the ceiling like some cursed cassette demon from *The Ring*. "It can bite us in the ass when we least expect it."

"And of course it comes back *now*, when we're just trying to have a good time as a family," Minhó grumbled. "Isn't the entire point of moving on to the present so we can leave it all behind?"

"Maybe it happens because something in the world knows you're strong enough to face it in a way you couldn't before." A skitter of claws on the ceiling- Minhó looked up; there he was: Bambam, in the red, scaly form of a five foot long reptile.

Minhó had to smile. *Salamander*. Of course. "Sounds plausible enough."

Bambam's iron gray eyes glittered with his trademark spirit. "So, Kai! How does it feel to finally have taken him out?"

"Could you maybe switch back to your mortal form now? I feel like a backwoods Disney princess."

"You have singlehandedly slain the huns, Minlan. I'm just your Thai lizard sidekick congratulating you on the task."

Minho halfheartedly threw a shell at him. "After eighty-something years of living in fear of his smug rat face and what it could have done to the ones I care about, it feels- I don't know. Lighter. Freer, like a weight's been lifted." He scoffed. "Or thirty." *Or maybe the whole state of Oregon.* "It wasn't just the lamp holding me down; it was the power I let it and everyone else who found it hold over me. And after shoving that into a homemade black hole, I think I can help my friend do a variation of the same. Even if I didn't think I'd have to do it a second time."

Bambam dropped from the ceiling, poofing mortal form to spare Minho's sanity. "Sounds like you're gearing up for helluva fight."

"The fighting I'm used to. It's the excitement that's come with it which is unnerving." *And all because Chan got me to go outside.* "Wonder how it'll end this time."

"Alright." Chan stopped pacing, started again. "Okay."

"Any moment now," hummed Jaebum, leaning placidly against the rock wall.

"I'm cool, I'm good, just." He let a breath out. "I understand we don't know each other very well."

"First impression passed the vibe check."

"And that this is not the best time to talk about it, given you're currently hiding my group from an evil tyrant who's after one of my kids."

"You did not meet me in the 50's."

"And this might be a weird ask."

"I kinda got that when you asked if there was any shadow space behind the waterfall."

"But I figured I'd ask anyway."

"Hit me," said Jaebum easily. "I'm sure I can take it."

The ring on his finger shimmered silver. Behind this rushing clearwater curtain, they could say anything. *What the hell.* Why not.

"So." Chan clapped his hands together. "You're married." Jaebum's eyebrows shot bemusedly up. "Which is nothing to me, given I am also in a happy committed relationship." He nodded: *go on.* "But, like. Minho and I, we... aren't? Married, I mean."

Jaebum nodded again, serene as ever. Then he frowned. "Wait. You aren't?"

"No." Chan stopped his pacing to backtrack. "You thought we were?"

"I dunno. Usually monsters who've been together as long as you two have got something to show for it. And even if they don't it doesn't say anything bad about them."

"Oh." *Well.* "That's... oddly gratifying." *Come on, buddy. Back to important matters.* "But, uh, anyways. That's something I've been thinking about. And wanting change, so, as someone with positive experience, I was wondering if maybe you could... help me with that?"

"You mean like... propose?"

"Yeah." If this was how it felt just admitting it, Chan was going to need all the help he could get.

Jaebum's expression cleared. "Shit, why didn't you say so?" he laughed. "I'd be happy to help."

"Really?"

"Sure. Hold up- you got a rock, right?" Chan readily whipped out the box and snapped it open. Jaebum squinted to inspect, hummed his

approval. "What do you want advice on?"

Everything, Chan's brain supplied immediately. Obviously that was a bit much. "Well, I guess I was mostly wondering how you went about it," he confessed. "I mean, all I really know about proposals came from, well, the good old days of hetero human religion."

"Boo," monotoned Jaebum over a thumbs-down.

"Right. And, even if it's no difference in the long run, it's a step I want to take, and see what he says to it."

Jaebum smiled wryly, softly. "Well, the first lesson is, you're wrong about that," he said. "The ring's just a symbol- the union can mean anything you want it to mean. Permanence, strength, love that'll last." The corner of his mouth lifted knowingly. "That's what you were thinking, right."

"Yeah." *But...* "But how do you let *him* know that too?"

Jaebum furrowed his brow, Sherlock on a case. "Elaborate."

"Well..." *Research rant: go*. The pacing revived itself. "The whole institution of marriage was just so that one could gain something from the other, economical profit instead of love- usually some old rich asshole buying off a girl who had no say in the first place - essentially trapping both in a union. And since, well. Since the last guy to approach Minho with a ring and a question I ended up punching out of a tank, I'm just hoping it won't feel like a repeat of that."

"And he's a djinn right?" Nod. "Add that to the backstory, and..." A low whistle that ended in a scoff. Jaebum placed a hand on Chan's shoulder to stop his stride. "I know how you feel, kid."

Oof. "You do?"

"Not to say anything about Jinyoung, but. Yeah. We were both going through shit when we met. The Isle had gotten hit by Hurricane Eloise- enough to do damage past the enchantments. I'd been hunting for tools to fix it." As if he was coming back to earth, he shook his head. "But proposal-wise, I'd say not to worry about it. If he's felt safe with you for this long, he'll know it won't mean any harm." A firelight flicker came alight in Jaebum's eye. "It's all a matter of equivalent exchange."

"Of... what?"

"Equality between two beings. Respect for their lives as well as your own. The give of as much one is willing to spare and the take of as much as one is willing to accept. Two rings- two halves of one whole, one promise." For a moment, the dragon could be seen coiling around his glimmering golden words. "If you know how much you're willing to give and get in return as well as how much he's willing to do the same, then the rest will come easy."

Chan thought of all his first friends falling in love and flying off with it one by one. "Okay." He thought of Hyunjin taking their coven into a whole new environment so Jisung could feel safe, of Felix slotting his hand into Changbin's at the bar and promising to listen, of Seungmin and Jeongin giggling late into the night at My Neighbor Totoro, of Minho and the life he'd spent at his side, days and nights in Levanter- all the things they put themselves through for love. "Okay, I get it."

"I wonder how God feels knowing this is what his disciples do with their time," murmured Seungmin.

"I bet differs day by day," Youngjae replied cheerfully. "Somedays appalled, others entertained. But mostly terrified!"

"Why do you say that with such a big smile?"

"Because I just got the image." Seungmin saw it too. Youngjae knew it. "C'mon. It's funny."

"Damn you."

Seungmin had little to no idea how someone as bright and bubbly as Youngjae could be a reaper- the 'God-fearing cousins of valkyries,' Jihyo called them. Kindly enough, however, he had offered to give him a tour of the upstairs, which turned out to be more than just a way to get a better view.

"Here on the left is our library," said Youngjae, grandly gesturing to the rows of shelves. "We have everything from the transcribed Epic of Gilgamesh to Fairy Tail, but we don't fuck with the 100 Year Quest."

"Wisely so," commended Seungmin. Peering even deeper, he gasped. "Is... is that-"

"A plushie corner, yes. We came to the early conclusion that our home would be incomplete without it."

"I think I've changed my sleeping reservations for tonight." Then, on the right: "Oh, *hell*, what is that?"

"An obstacle course for Bammie's cats," answered Youngjae cheerfully. "We found a bunch of cat towers and connected them to other Goodwill junk. Helps keep them entertained."

"Why is it... on the wall?" The course was built on the ridge of the barrier, maybe five inches from brushing the clouds. There had to be magic involved- it looked like it might tip over with a breeze.

"They like feeling closer to the trees," he explained. "Gives them an easier way to climb them." Youngjae looked ahead, and his face lit up. "Come on! This one's the best."

Grabbing Seungmin's hand, he dragged him up the aisle, rounding the corner past the watchtower and stopping at the center sect- a miniaturized shrine with the same structure as the temple, sheer white curtains shielding the entrance. Once they brushed past them, he saw that the space was empty save for the ornate rug spread over the cherrywood panel floors fronted by an organ pipe array of candles. A wall of unknowable scrawlings stood before a barren tome spread out wide, a quill nestled in the line of its spine.

Seungmin had walked in on many of Minho's sorcery room rituals during his time; some were as sinful as bartering with some underworld entity, others were more commonplace, like contacting Yubin for an extension on a library book. "And this is...?"

"A memorial altar. Usually I'm the only one who uses it, but the others are welcome too." Youngjae knelt in front of the book and motioned for Seungmin to do the same. "Come on, it won't bite."

Half sure that it would, Seungmin complied, gingerly seating himself next to him. "So, what do you do here?"

Youngjae's radiant grin toned down to a gentler hue. "When I'm called out to take a soul to the afterlife, it's sudden, informal. Usually a dove hits my window." Seungmin gulped. "The dove lives. But the job isn't as easy as it sounds. Sometimes the souls don't want to leave- they don't want to let go of their lives, or they're scared to find out what's waiting for them. It can take hours or days to convince them. And normally after I do, I never really see them again." His hand skimmed the open book, and whorls of ink came to life on the pages. "With this book, I can check in from afar."

The ink spread out into sharp lines and fluid black-traced figures to create a board of noir comic panels, all alive with different portrayals of mundane life. "See her?" Youngjae pointed to an old woman scratching the belly of an alligator. "That's Harriet- she died in Hurricane Irma and only agreed to go to heaven when I told her she could bring her pet alligator Denver with her." He pointed to a man in

a bowler hat. "That's Sahir- he's been trying to finish War and Peace since 1993. Hope he gets to the musical someday."

Seungmin could read the writing on the wall now; they were names, names of people Youngjae had helped give peace. "You said your other members use this too."

"They do. Whenever they want to see someone they miss, or want to check on them without disturbing them. YugBam like to check on Chan sometimes, Jackson on his port friends." Youngjae bit his lip, paused before adding. "Jinyoung checked on Hyunjin. And his sister, too."

Huh. "That's sweet."

Flipping to an empty page, Youngjae held the quill out to him. "What about you? There's got to be someone you miss."

Seungmin's gut wrenched.

Of course there was someone he missed. He was probably going to miss him for the rest of his life, no matter how many years he got by without him. *Family's never easy to forget.*

"No," Seungmin answered on instinct. "I mean- yes. No, it's just- it's complicated." He batted the quill away. "I wish I didn't."

Youngjae winced. "Oof. What happened?"

"Nothing." He grimaced, switched up the answer. "Not nothing, just... I'm not really sure. It was just my cousin from my old pack. Wonpil."

"Oh." Youngjae's face went from alarmed to concerned, the non-condescending kind that was real. "Shit, I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to be." But, just like so many others in his life, he was. *And I don't know what I did to deserve it.* "He was just..." God, Seungmin was never going to be good at explaining this. "When I was a kid, I was- alone. Not literally- just the kind where you're

surrounded by people, but no one really cares. My parents weren't around, or alive, for very long, so I didn't really have anyone to call family. To call my friend. I was just the latchkey kid who sort of drifted around and tried to fit into any niche that would take me. And that was just life." *With a sweet-faced, soft-hearted light in the middle of it.* "But every once in a while, he came around, and it just happened to be whenever I needed him most. It shouldn't have meant as much as it did, I guess- he was just being nice. But, sometimes, whether I wasn't doing enough, or trying enough, or seeing the point in either, he was the only one who was kind to me all day. And one day..." *The first full moon arrives.* "He stopped coming too. So, honestly, I don't really want to know why, because it might just confirm what I'm afraid of."

That Seungmin hadn't been enough to make him stay, to make him care. Years of thinking it, and it still felt embarrassing.

There was an extremely long pause before Youngjae set down the quill. "It doesn't sound like your fault." Which of course he'd say. Like an *asshole*.

"Wonpil could've had a lot of reasons," he went on. "A lot of times, people do things we don't understand, no matter how well we know them. But if he loved you enough to keep coming back, I'm sure it wasn't you."

Seungmin must have been born with a solar magnet inside of him. Somehow, he kept pulling the sunshine into his life. "Maybe."

"And there it is!" Yugyeom announced proudly. "My pride and joy."

Changbin squinted through the sepia. "Is that you?"

"Fresh from breaking into the CBGB."

"... you framed your mugshot?"

"Everyone remembers the 70's."

One former antifacist to another, Changbin knew a day spent with Yugyeom would be a fun one. Already, they had spent the first hour cruising around the temple, telling each other about the best of their past lives, occasionally dipping out the way of nosy little King, who Changbin had personally memorized on account of thinking he was a naked mole rat on first glance.

"But the door was locked," Changbin went on. "So you know what I had to do."

Yugyeom gasped. "No."

"We would've used the key, but Tyler had gotten caught spiking the punch, and Miguel had promised his little brother he'd look after his pet rock, so."

"You *dog*."

Changbin grinned. "In our defense, the window was asking for it." Stealing the principal's key ring to free the bio-test pigs on the night of senior prom hadn't been his most recent adventure, but it was one of the more exciting ones.

"We knew they were being kept in the band storage room, and the place used to be a garage. So, all it took was the press of a button, the honk of a horn, and boom: Animal Farm revolution."

Yugyeom tossed his head back laughing as they ambled into the courtyard. "*Jesus*. And nobody caught you guys?"

"Course not. The staff was too busy making sure no one was hooking up on the dance floor, and the principal didn't care about any dances. Crazier things happened in small town South Side."

"And you did all that to impress a guy?"

Not just a guy. Changbin blushed, bit the inside of his cheek to stop it. "He really didn't want to dissect those pigs- they were just babies. I don't know how he felt about me before then, / didn't even fully know I liked him, but hey. It was worth it."

Yugyeom hummed his assent. "Sounds solid."

"Really? I get approval from the reformed mafia grunt of The Fortunate Isles?"

"Sure. I mean, it's nothing like the time I got a whole bar on their feet in Ain't Misbehavin', but it deserves recognition."

Changbin scoffed. "Are you just one of those guys who tries to one up everyone else's story with their own?"

"Only when I know mine is better."

They plopped down on the stone steps, lounging out like cats in the summer heat.

"Those were the days, weren't they?" sighed Yugyeom.

"They sure were," Changbin replied blissfully. "Sure were." Being human had been so easy: all you really had to figure was what you wanted to do, who you wanted to do it with, and how you wanted it to play out, ingrained with the lie that you only lived once.

"So..." Yugyeom trailed, drumming his fingers on the stairs. "How'd it end for you?"

The question pulled Changbin up short.

It was kind of an unspoken agreement, between second-life monsters, at least, not to ask how they'd inevitably left their first one. With Chan and the others, it had taken them about a week after learning he was a demon to work up the nerve. But Yugyeom was just lying back, watching the yellow beetle crawling up to his hand like he was cool with it too.

So Changbin exhaled. "Knife fight gone wrong. Had to get my sister out of a tough situation." Yugyeom nodded, equally solemn and understanding. "You?"

"Shot in a botched transaction. Got left behind by my crew."
Changbin whistled low. "Five years later, it was how I met Chan."

He choked on his breath. "*That's* how you guys met?"

"Yup. I'd hitched a ride from South Philadelphia, couch surfed a bit and found Got7 in between. Jaebum tried to help me make a home here, but I wouldn't listen. Stayed long as gone as I could. The curse of every poltergeist." A surprisingly bitter laugh. "On a job, I was caught in a rainstorm that lead me into Eldritch." A muscle twitched softly in Yugyeom's jaw. "That was the day that changed everything."

Changbin already knew what was coming next. "Because it was the day you just *happened* to meet Bambam."

"Hey, don't shit on love at first sight. It has *base*."

"I know, I know."

"It might've been unexpected, but it was the push I needed to get to that stop sign. To show me that I could spend summer in one spot and have it mean just as much as it did before." Yugyeom chuckled. "In a way, he was the reason I settled down."

"Like hell." Changbin smacked his arm. "Chan told me what you guys did on St. Patrick's in '51."

"Hey, that was a *holiday*." Yugyeom shoved him right back. "What I meant was that I realized I'd finally found a place to call home. That I'd gotten myself somewhere and someone to run to when I needed to rest. That I'd calmed down enough to see what I had and know I didn't want to let it go. Obviously, you gotta know what I mean by that."

And he did. Satan forgive and God forget, Changbin could have written a whole fucking novel on how he knew exactly what Yugyeom meant. "Yeah, I do."

"And while we didn't choose the lives we ended up with," Yugyeom lifted the beetle up on his palm. "This one's pretty nice, isn't it?"

The beetle buzzed like an old motor and fluttered off, gaining upward speed, a bullet aiming for the sun. "It sure is."

"Hold on," grunted Mark. "I almost got it."

"Well, then hurry it up!" Jisung hissed back. "This is a once in a lifetime experience. It's not going to last much longer!"

"I *know*." Mark changed his angle, zoomed in closer. "I'm gonna tell my kids this was The Creation of Adam."

"You have *kids*?"

"I don't plant *those* kind of seeds. I'm talking about my squirrels- they live in the old watchtower. They like to listen Night Vale before bed."

"Dude, *lit*."

"Look, here she comes!" Immediately, Jisung snapped to attention. "Steady, steady..."

The possum swung upside down by her tail, reached out and, in time for the click of Mark's camera, took the apple chip from Jisung's hand.

"Yes!" Jisung cheered as she scurried back up the tree. "There *is* hope for this world!"

"Eleanor's been living here for years- has to have about seven kids now," said Mark. "She knows we're not going to hurt her, so we're pretty chill."

"We had a Pacific fisher like that- Maximilian, grumpy single dad with a daughter. He only really liked Minho, though. Sometimes, he'd drop in and bring him little prey skeletons."

"Love that." Mark wandered ahead through the forest, running a hand along a knot in an oak tree, as if he knew how long it had been there. "None of us really know how they get here. Hurricane washups, migrants who stayed through the seasons. All we really know is that they've managed to feel as safe as we do here."

"Noah's ark but ungodly."

Mark laughed. "Exactly."

It might've just been dumb luck that Hyunjin's older brother happened to live in such a beautiful place, or that it had been indoctrinated in Jisung since birth to find the sight of natural greenery calming, but he could feel the tension Irene's sigil had coiled up in him starting to sap away. He felt as if he might be back in Portland with the Douglas firs and evergreens, listening to the morning bluebirds. Just an hour out here, and he could forget why he was running.

Jisung tucked the wrapper of his chips in his pocket, grinning down at the bush of cream wild indigo that bloomed as he crossed it. "Always thought Louisiana was more swamp than solid."

"Mostly true," Mark amended, spotting them a cluster of mossy boulders shaded by a green ash. "We just got the good parts."

Jisung took in the verdant sheen on everything he saw, the precious life it sustained, the pulse of the roots beneath the ground he could feel through his shoes. "Maybe that's what Irene was with it."

Mark's expression melted into softly worn lines of worry. "How you feeling?" The ask was genuine, no judgement found within.

Tiredly, Jisung sank down on one of the rocks in front of the lesly. "A little better," he admitted. "Less scared."

"You've got no reason to be," Mark promised. "The Isles've been removed from civilization since pretty much forever. "If there's anywhere you'll be safe, it's here."

"That's what I thought about Levanter, until the first letter came." *And I decided to join in on the most death-defying road quest known to man.* "She's been baiting me for years, trying to draw me out into another one of her schemes. Now I'm farther away from home than I have been in decades, and I'm right where she wants me."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up over it. She lies low, sticks the fear in you when you don't think she's around. It's one of her favorite tricks." Mark added- probably just to make him feel better: "It was how she almost got me, remember?"

Jisung chuckled feebly. "Right. Your dramatic backstory." They'd both escaped Irene's clutches and managed to make it out with the bonus of their lives. "Mark."

"Yeah?"

"You've kept tabs on Irene for so long- you have to have some idea as how she did it. How she got this powerful."

Mark's genial smile dimmed to a grimace. He'd been a protector once, like Jisung, until he got dragged into the fog. "Irene's a master of fear- what she can't find she'll put in you like scorpion's poison before she ever uses force. It weakens you, gets you to reveal your blindspots where she can strike. She doesn't look for the reasons why you'd want to join her. She looks for the ways she can make you stay, give you no choice, take until you've got nothing to fight for. Whoever she picks up is either too scared or too numb to fight back."

Broken down like this, Jisung could have almost laughed at how familiar it sounded. "Damn. Still the same tactic?"

"Ageless one."

"If that's the case, then she's already wrecked half the ecosystems in the U.S."

"Sometimes she doesn't have to. I used to have friends who were converts- with all the changes going around in the world, some get desperate, or some don't have much else. They join her ranks to feel safe, to feel like a part of something."

Jisung groaned, thumping his head on the tree trunk. "Man. Three weeks in, and we're facing another crazy manipulative dictator?"

A vinelike branch slapped him in the shoulder; it took him a minute to realize it wasn't a branch, but Mark's transformed hand. "You weren't alone for that, were you?"

"... No."

"Then you won't be for this."

"He did what to the *what?*" exclaimed Jinyoung.

"He created Thor's Well after getting into a fight with the Yachat's river god," Jeongin repeated. "Your brother in the 2000's was a wild man."

"Hyunjin really did grow up."

"He got it from you, didn't he? Jackson told me about the time you lead their break into the mayor of Louisiana's crawfish boil."

"Well, I didn't steal the mayor's blue fucking Stingray."

"Hey!" Minho yelled from the couch. "Popcorn doesn't take ten minutes!"

Dinner was almost two hours ago. The living room had dissolved into a courtroom of screaming chaos. Jaebum took up the center of the conversation pit with a whiteboard split into five columns.

"Silence!" Jaebum shouted. "Calm yourselves, gentlemen!"

"This is heresy!" argued Mark.

"I call bullshit!" shrieked Jisung.

"Humanity has crimes to answer for," intoned Seungmin, dunking his fist into the bowl of popcorn Jeongin held out to him. "This is the only way they will answer for them."

"Enough!" Jaebum roared; the sound waves were strong enough to blow them all back into the cushions, hands clapped over their ears.

"Okay, damn," muttered Yugyeom.

"This isn't that hard a choice to make. We have five movies to choose from, and all we have to do is agree on one."

"How are we supposed to do that when all five are cinematic masterpieces?" complained Felix.

"Dead Poets Society, Steel Magnolias, Crazy Rich Asians, The Grand Budapest Hotel, *and* Big Time Movie," Jeongin summed up. "Mayhem was bound to ensue!"

"Whatever the decision, it better be before ten thirty," Chan chimed in. "I've been on time for goodnight FaceTimes with Berry, and I'm not gonna be late now."

"There is one option that could top them all."

The whole group swerved around to see Bambam smiling in the corner, having been eerily silent since the start of the discussion.

"Then put us out of our misery," said Changbin. "Lay it on us."

Bambam's grin took that very opening to spread out wide. "For those of us who remember the year 2017, it was the time that our Jinyoung-"

"Wait-" Jinyoung attempted.

"- starred a lead role in -"

"No- "

"- the hit drama He Is Psychometric."

The grenade hit the ground smoking. When it detonated, it wiped out the entire room.

"You did fucking *WHAT?!'*" Hyunjin screamed. He'd jumped over Jisung, Felix, and Mark to shake his brother by his sweater collar.

"I was bored, and I'd just acted as Orpheus in the local production of Hades-town-"

"And you didn't think to TELL ME?"

"We have a star in our midst!" declared Chan.

"Let's start a fanclub," Jisung whispered to an enthusiastic Jaebum.

"Put it on, we're bingewatching!" yelled Yugyeom.

The leviathan silenced by a handful of popcorn crammed into his mouth, both covens huddled together in front of an animated flatscreen, blankets wrapped and draped over a messy huddle that laughed when one giggled, howled when one yelped, bawled when one cried. All throughout, Hyunjin whispered to a humbled Jinyoung the parts he liked. Changbin and Jisung cracking up at Jaebum and Bambam quoting an episode word for word. Seungmin not taking his eyes off the characters as the bowl made its rounds, slowly dwindling to a buttery shell when the finale came around.

Maybe they were adrift in the water, separate from the rest of the world. But they were anything but lost.

Upper Side Dreamin' - ENHYPEN

*At Last - 1960's Etta James album. Stan her.

*Test Drive - John Powell

*Ain't Misbehavin' - Fats Waller

This Is Home

Chapter 22: This Is Home

WHOOO sorry about that, hyperfixation + finals caught up to me, but now I'm back!

Might've seen this coming, but here you have it: our favorite Nature Boy (pun intended, for those who get it) Jisung's backstory! It's gonna get sad, so I'll just dip out at that.

TW: brief descriptions of bullet injuries, drowning and depression.

I'll cut my hair

(Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh) To make you stare

(Ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh, ooh) I'll hide my chest

And I'll figure out a way to get us out of here...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Bellingham, Washington - 1963

Summer had filled the forest with music.

*"Yeah, I'll tell you something,"**

"I think you'll understand,"

The sky was painted a shimmery dulcet yellow with brushstroke streaks of cloud, honey luster fading out light to dark amber as it stretched out the guarded horizon. Rays of sunlight filtered through

the feathery green leaves of paper birch trees, whose oddly etched eyes seemed track anything that crossed their path. Beves of dwarf lupines,* scatterings of yellow-eyed grass basked in the warmth. A rushing waterfall crashed in the distance, filling a brook for traveling elks. Golden early birds poked their heads out of their nests, chirping hello to the woodland beneath them.

"When I say that something,"

"I wanna hold your hand,"

Marmots stopped chasing each other down fir trees, cocked their heads up to listen. Ravens forgot their prey to perch on branches nearby. Little pikas peeked out from their burrows with their tiny jaws still clamped around pulled-up dandelion sprigs.

A pretty gnome girl, blond hair tied back from her eyes, raced up the hill. Meeting their curious eyes, she laughed. "Come on!"

Wings flapped, paws and hooves hit the ground, and they followed after her, flanked by other faeries, nymphs, satyrs, even solitary nixies who strayed from their lakes and ponds to hear the song.

Home was where the heart was: beating sound in the trunk of a blue wisteria. Resting on their roots in a clearing, Jisung strummed the melody, hummed the lyrics, blissfully aware of the audience around him.

"And when I touch you, I feel happy," he crooned softly to the trio gray squirrels that approached, laughing as they beckoned the rest of their company forward. *"Inside."*

"It's such a feeling that, my love,"

"I can't hide,"

"I can't hide,"

"I can't hide,"

They came in a hesitant, tenuous current- chittering starlings, raccoons, rabbits, deer, even that one cougar who refused to go anywhere without her skunk life partner on her back.

"Yeah, you," Jisung sang into the blushing morning sun. "Got that something, I think you'll understand,"

"When I say that something,"

"I wanna hold your hand,"

The forest watched him from where they couldn't interrupt- a one man orchestra with nothing but an acoustic guitar that even the mountain goats could hear, fluffy blue hair and a bohemian button-down tucked into weathered, earth-smudged jeans that had spent ages wearing and tearing through the wildlife of Washington; their spriggan, their one and only.

"I wanna hold your hand,"

"I wanna hold your hand,"

With the finishing chords, quiet as the quick flutter of a dove's wing, the finale echoed throughout the clearing:

"I wanna hold your hand."

When the silence settled on the grass, the usual round of applause took the place of the song, coming from all around. Jisung opened his eyes to it as he returned to solid ground; the bashful smile that bloomed over his face was both routine and helplessly genuine.

"Thank you for your time, folks!" he called up to them, bowing with his guitar. "I'll be here all night!"

"And all day, and all week after that." The slow clapping caught up to his ears, and Jisung turned around to see Minhyuk approaching with a welcome smile. "Aren't you ever going to get bored of being a forest spriggan?"

Jisung grinned. "Like you need to ask."

"Because somehow, you roped me into being your sidekick," droned Minhyuk. "The pay wasn't even good."

"So you're saying my protection and friendship isn't enough for you?"

"A guy could use a bonus." But Minhyuk laughed through his barb. "You really wouldn't want to be anything else?"

"A cult leader, someone's lead guitarist- oh! A *model*, I mean, come on, this face is meant to be appreciated."

Minhyuk rolled his eyes. "You ready to make the rounds?"

"And greet my subjects? Always." He snapped his fingers, and from the sky, an eagle dropped his brown corduroy into his waiting hand. "Let's roll."

As unfulfilled as Minhyuk claimed to be, it was important for any forest caretaker to get some help every now and then- he was lucky enough to have an accomplished ghillie du like Minhyuk at his side to take up the job.

Days were consumed by combing through the forest, checking in on all the citizens and the daily goings-on of things. There might not have been any concrete in the jungle, but it was a jungle all the same.

"Byron, Brunhilde, how are we doing today?" Jisung asked the pair of robins who lived in the oldest pine in the wood, having used its roots to ascend to the top. Byron chirped in response. "New eggs in the nest? Congratulations!"

Down by the trunk, Minhyuk gasped. "How many?"

Jisung peeked into the nest where Brunhilde lifted a wing to let him see. "Two," he reported. "I'll take a survey for some name ideas- but

I'll keep it under wraps from Lyle. I'm not letting him name your child Tartar Sauce."

Speaking of Lyle-

"Dammit, Lyle, stop trying to eat the bunnies!" Jisung jumped another boulder after the shellycoat. "They're our friends, not your food!"

Lyle, that grimy swamp monster son of a bitch, hissed and dove into his river, sinking to the mossy bottom.

Minhyuk, arm full of five terrified rabbits, peered behind him. "You have to evict him- his existence alone is a biohazard."

Jisung sighed and brushed off his jacket. "Only when he stops stealing our water sources."

Meanwhile, there was always helping that lone wolf move into a stable home.

"Alright, we've been looking around based on your criteria," said Minhyuk. "And I think we've finally found a winner."

Jisung took his hands from Rowan's eyes and added jazz hands for good measure. "Ta-da!"

The tree hollow was nothing really impressive- just an overturned oak trunk that time, wind, and perhaps a bit of fungi had excavated. However, the gray wolf didn't seem to be as picky. He trotted ahead, sniffing at the spots of moss and mushroom growth on the bark. On finding he was able to slink in through the hollow, he settled down and made himself at home, grunting his approval.

"Yes!"

"I *knew* six would be the charm."

While Minhyuk helped Rowan move the rest of his stuff in, Jisung moved on through the grove, shooting a finger gun at a blossoming plum tree. "Wonderful harvest, Handong, as per usual."

The hamadryad's head swiveled around from the crown of the tree, branches lowering and melting back into spindly fingers. "You'd starve with this forest if I didn't."

"True, true," Jisung admitted. "Thankfully, we're sure to keep you in good hands."

"I really can't thank you enough for taking care of that wasp problem!" Handong giggled at the root attaching to his foot. "You're getting their attention again."

She didn't mean any real harm, just the mandrakes who lived underground and occasionally resurfaced to cause the necessary dose of mischief. Sure enough, they came popping out of the grass, grabby hands pulling at his shoelaces and laughing beneath the dirt.

"Hey- hey, come on, now, let go," Jisung chided, hopscotching a radish-looking toddler off his toe. "Jeez. Never catch a break with those guys."

"It's only because they love you," said Handong. "I can't think of a being in this forest who doesn't."

And there wasn't one. They had all been together since the beginning, growing up and growing old, always loving the place they lived in. Jisung wouldn't have wanted anything else to change.

He would've kept right on smiling if he hadn't heard the gunshot.

The birds cried out in alarm. The leaves on Handong's tree flinched. Minhyuk was calling Jisung's name but he was already taking off for the brook, weaving round trees and crashing through branches, heartbeat pounding with his footsteps.

By the time he shoved the limbs of two paper birches out of the way, the scene was already unfolding: twin foxglove dryads pulling kushtaka Gaahei out of the water, the lower half of her body still an otter's furry flippers.

"The shot came from out there." One of the twins pointed shakily out past the border. "We didn't even have time to transform."

"Fucking *hunters*," Jisung seethed. He shucked his jacket to the ground and dropped on his knees, slamming his palms into the grass. The roots beneath it answered his call, thrashing and rumbling under the dirt, making a beeline for the ones who had disturbed their slumber. From far away, a yelp and a shout came from two gruff voices, followed by the departure of hard boots.

Jisung didn't waste time worrying. "Send the golems out to see if they can deal with them," he told one of the twins as he switched off to Gaahei. "How you holding up? You okay?"

"Fine," she gritted out, pressing her hand to her right side. Red seeped through her fingers, already staining wet skin and fur brown. "I think they missed all the important stuff."

"That doesn't mean they didn't get any organs!" argued the other twin. "You might've been shot in your liver!"

"Who even knows what that does?"

"Focus, guys," Jisung snapped. He rapidly blinked the blurriness out of his eyes. "Is the bullet still inside, do you know?"

"I... I don't think so."

"Here." The foxglove dryad pointed in the brook: a tiny hole had drilled into the dirt where water was tinged with a faint cloud of crimson. "I think it was a clean shot."

"Good." The bleeding didn't look too heavy- that was a relief. Grabbing the jacket he'd thrown aside, Jisung gave it to Gaahei. "Tie this tight around the wound. Try to apply pressure. You're gonna be alright."

"I know." Yet as Gaahei obeyed, she winced. "Can't ever just swim in peace, can't I?"

"It wasn't your fault- they shouldn't have been here in the first place." This was their home, *his* forest. He could have been able to stop them- he *should* have. "Just- just hold on." *Fucking think, do something, help her.* "I'm gonna see if I can close this."

The foxglove dryad gripping her hand, Jisung suspended one of his own over the wound, willing the ground beneath to move, to give back to him, even if in just the smallest form. "Ready?"

Gaahei nodded. Swallowing down his fears, he splayed out his hand and the flower sprouted up, roots weaving around the stem so it could span to the width of a bullet shell. As it grew through the wound, she grimaced with her whole face, squeezing the dryads hand so hard the skin of her knuckles paled to white.

Jisung bit down the multiplying apologies that bounced around his mind. *It won't do her any good,* he scolded himself. *Not when you couldn't even protect her in the first place.*

"You can-" His voice quavered; he pushed it down. "You can let go of the jacket now."

Gingerly, she loosened her grip finger by finger, let the bundle of fabric fall off to the side. In place of the wound was a daisy- stem enlarged and tied off to remain in place, white petals spanning over smears of blood.

"You'll have to go to Minhyuk and Handong for further remedies," he continued, "but that should hold for now."

“Jisung-“

”I’ll reinforce the barriers and see what kind of natural defenses we can set out- maybe Lyle can scare them off.”

”Jisung-“

”In the meantime, the grove’s probably a safer place- stay in your human form for about three more days before-“

”Jisung, I’m *okay*.” Gaahei offered up a fragile, commiserative smile. She touched her bloodstained hand to his. “You can stop crying now.”

Jisung blinked; all at once, he could feel the wetness on his cheeks, the flush on his face that didn’t come from any summer glow. He hadn’t even known he was crying.

Abruptly he stood, holding his jacket by the collar. “I’ll, uh. Check on you in an hour or two.” Turning away from their concerned faces, he squeezed his eyes shut, pretending not to feel the burn. “See you.”

Gaahei might’ve said ‘thank you,’ but he’d already gone too far to hear it. Trudging back from the grove, he had to meet a new collection of stares: creatures who’d heard the shot, seen him spring into action, wanted to know how he’d stopped the forest from getting hurt today.

He gave the usual answers- that nobody was seriously injured, that the forest was safe, that nothing would happen under his watch. What else could he do, *tell them* their home was dying out with every passing year? They already knew that for themselves; even if it was just the benefit of the doubt, he couldn’t risk showing a sliver of weakness, not when they depended on him. *If I don’t protect them, what kind of spriggan am I?*

In the center clearing, the golden aura had deepened to orange, sunrise to sunset in the blink of an eye. If Jisung strapped his guitar

to his back, avoided the finches and sparrows while scaling the branches, and made it to the top, he could see it for himself, shining over everything he had stood to lose.

The tree stumps resembled a graveyard- all lives taken, charred headstones with no names -but it stretched out for miles on faded grass that had long since died with it. They had been homes, once, to friends and neighbors and hopeful nobodies just trying to find their way. Those dried up craters had been ponds where deer drank, fish swam, squirrels bathed. Every boot-crushed weed, anthill, and flower had a story, and year after year, they were being ended before their time was even up yet.

Everyone knew the dangers. They knew humans were getting closer with every advancement they made into the terrible thing they called modern knowledge, and there was no stopping it. But what they didn't know- what he refused to say -was how it affected him. That a spriggan was only as strong as their forest, and every tree chopped in his domain ticked another day off the clock.

Another day.

Jisung slunk down to a sturdy branch and leaned against the trunk, stained corduroy hung on a tree knot. Guitar in his hands, he started to play, a slow, mournful beginning to a lullaby that all could hear.

*"I wash my tired body, come out and turn the TV on again,"**

"Uninteresting news yet again today, so many unknown words,"

Atop the highest tree in the wood, Byron and Brunhilde huddled close, cooing at the eggs they were sworn to protect. In the swamp, Lyle huddled away under the water, pulling his algae-covered cloak around him. Even little Rowan, in his cozy tree hollow, closed his eyes to drift away.

"What was the most important task?"

"I wanted to do so many things, but I kept getting chased down by time,"

In the grove, the mandrakes slept, letting Handong dress Gaahei's wound with a leaf-woven wraparound bandage. Sitting on the branch of a paper birch, Minhyuk followed the lyrics to where the voice was humming on, knowing it couldn't have come from anyone else.

"There are so many things in this world,"

"But there's never a space for me to rest without worry,"

Jisung closed his eyes to the dimming, dawning sun; he already knew the rest by heart.

"Just stretching my feet and laying down doesn't make me relax,"

"Even when I shut my eyes, I sleep without dreams,"

"Gasp at breath whenever I wake up from sleep, moment of dizziness,"

"Meaningless day, always a repeat at the end,"

Three days after, and it was like nothing had ever happened. The crack in the road was patched up and forgotten, trampled over by hundreds of paws, talons and feet. The foxglove twins were helping Gaahei back into the brook, Lyle was leering after a pair of jackrabbits, Byron was traveling out to get more branches for their nest, and a pika was sniffing a softly growling Rowan's nose while the wolf was trying to sleep. Another peaceful, normal day.

"So I had to be the one to tell him that no, he couldn't dig up a whole bush of beauty berries so he could truck it down to Hoboken, and, on failing to do that, explain to him why he couldn't do pelvic floor exercises in the grove," Minhyuk went on, filling Jisung in on the

bugbear who'd wandered into their forest in search of tradeable loot to bring him 'to the folks.' "It was a *nightmare*."

"What else would you expect from a Jersey guy?" Jisung teased. "At least he listened to you."

"Only because I told him off like, eight times."

"Maybe he just wanted to listen to your lovely voice."

"You have no idea what I go through."

"But I thank you for your endurance."

Minhyuk flipped him off in front of a smirk, and Jisung laughed at it.

"Jisung."

Her voice echoed behind his back; it slowed his stroll with a chill down his back, like creeping ivy was crawling up his spine. Irene had that effect on everyone.

Minhyuk's casual manner fogged over, smirk sobering to a stormy frown. "Hope you don't mind if I tuck and roll here."

"Be the one who can," Jisung muttered, sending him off. Taking a deep breath, he raised his crowd-pleaser grin as a shield and turned to meet her with it. "Irene. What brings you here?"

To anyone who knew better, Irene was an omen in a pastel blouse and flared pants. You couldn't always tell what it meant, but whenever it rolled around, you knew it couldn't mean anything good. She was beautiful on the surface, all charitable smiles and honeysuckle scent- except when she was walking your way with a look like she was going to dissect your insides with careful, calculating enjoyment.

Maybe it was just a resting face, but it was what Jisung saw when she walked his way. "Only that it's been too long since we've met,"

Irene said. "Spring turns to summer too soon."

"Both are times for new beginnings." *Which might one of these days start with some personal space respect.* "How's Georgia this time of year?"

"Green and serene as ever," she sighed. "It almost gets a little boring."

"Well, isn't that good? Boring means nothing too bad is happening."

"But nothing too fun, either." One of her eerie smiles made an appearance. "Heard that one of your water monsters got caught in the field of fire. Is she alright?"

"Gaahei's fine. Just needed a while to cope, that's all." Behind her, he could see two of her lackeys sprawled around: penghou Xiaojun trying to crawl up a paper birch after a pika and bluecap Hendery examining a plum from an annoyed Handong's tree. "I see you brought a few friends with you."

"Hm?" Irene glanced over her shoulder, regarded them with the indifference of two moths attacking a lamp. "Oh. Pay them no mind. CN, CN! Say hello."

"Lo," the monsters mumbled in unison, not looking away from their tasks.

Irene rolled her eyes. "No manners. Like a couple of weasels."

But she wouldn't have let them accompany her if she didn't think she would need backup. "What do you want?"

"Couldn't I have just wanted to reunite with another brother in arms?"

"I didn't know you placed that much value in sentiment."

"I sent you that spring greeting card last year, didn't I?"

“In autumn.”

“You know nothing ever changes in Georgia.” Jisung raised an eyebrow. “Which, evidently, is why I came here to see you.”

Girl always has to have some kind of scheme. “What’s the pitch?”

Behind her, Xiaojun and Hendery had stilled, frozen in place, awaiting order. Irene paid them no mind; she already had her game face fixed forward.

“We all know how our climate’s been looking these past few years,” she began. “Little by little, more and more land dying off because it doesn’t have the protection it needs to thrive- not just live. There’s simply too much coming from all sides at once, with not enough power for defense. You know what I’m talking about- all the humans and their machinery, those lousy hunters, the garbage they leave on our floors.” Just to drive the needle in a little deeper, she added: “All you have to do is look for the graveyard.”

Jisung bit hard on a grimace. He could hear Minhyuk telling him to rein it in. “Get to the point.”

“If we’re going to do something about it, we need to be all in- the best of the best standing guard where they need to be, protecting the ones who can’t protect themselves.”

“So... what? Are you proposing some kind of task force?”

“Only the best kind.” Hearing their cue, Xiaojun and Hendery departed from their places and took their positions at her side, two rigid guard dogs as model citizens. “The strongest earth monsters in the states, banded together to defend all natural life forms as we know them, crushing anything that comes in our way.”

“Crushing sounds a little overkill.”

"Nothing's overkill when it's what has to be done." Irene splayed out her arms with a confidence that never seemed to leave her. "The Wild Hunt- dedicated to purifying the world. The lead Southern chapter stems from Suches, borders spreading to both Carolinas and Florida." Her politics grin was back. "Plus, if we're lucky, the beginning of a Western chapter in the most forested part of Washington?"

Irene had always been the one to have the big ideas and ways to bring them into reality- with all that was to be said about her, it couldn't be said that she wasn't ambitious. "That's why you're here? A business bargain?"

"It wasn't like anyone *else* was going to come to your rescue. Look around you, Jisung- you're fighting the wolves off from all angles. We both know that's not good for you," she said, as if she actually cared. "With another spriggan in your corner, you'll be able to protect your forest *and* grow it again. Tell me there isn't some part of that which sounds tempting."

All of it did. Of course it did- that was the point. That was Irene's whole *deal*- she dressed up a ploy as a promise simply by using the right words. She did it for practically *everything*- she'd talked a whole swarm of bees into giving up their hive by promising another tree, which ended up being all the way out in Florida. It was always a half truth, always better sounded out than real. Maybe it wasn't her full time hobby, but he'd seen enough of it to be wary.

Even if there was some tiny, *tiny* part of him that wondered what would happen if he caved.

"What's the catch?" he asked, holding his ground. "If I were to agree to your terms, what would I have to do?"

Irene's bravado flickered. Even Xiaojun and Hendery glanced at each other in uncertainty.

“Well,” Irene started carefully, “The Hunt being an up-and-coming operation, you would have to go around and do some promotions-“

”Aaand knew it-“

”- with your forest in capable hands!”

”Irene, give me a break. You’re a spriggan too! You know the rule: the longer we’re away from our forests, the weaker it becomes.”

”You didn’t have to remind me.”

”Then what are you doing here all the way across the States?”

He’d dared a step closer; rookie mistake. Xiaojun and Hendery reared forward- the penghou with file-sharp bark for claws, sparks lacing down the bluecap’s arms. Irene’s smile was gone, replied with a line over a hard-set jaw, ironclad and ice cold.

“Because I thought I’d be coming all this way to talk to someone willing to defend what he loves,” she snarled, suddenly hostile. “I’d like to know if he’s around here somewhere.”

”He is,” Jisung replied, trying not to feel the sting of her insult. “He’s just not interested. I’ve got enough to worry about as it is- if you’ve already got as much of the South as you say on your side, then you can manage. Go find some other Western forester willing to help. I’m staying here.”

Xiaojun and Hendery’s scowls didn’t waver an inch, but Irene’s hand on their shoulders brought them down. “Have it your way, then,” she said coolly, ceding back. “You know where we’ll be if you change your mind.”

Even as she turned around with her possé, he knew she’d be back. “Until then.”

Time passed in days, weeks, and months, and his mind never changed. It never had the time, not with all the beings to watch over—dryads who needed a decent water source nearby, herbivores who needed sustainable plant life to keep them going, carnivores who needed places to hunt without worrying about a bullet in the hide. The ecosystem rested on a wobbling tightrope: every day, it listed just a little farther to the side, and it was up to Jisung to keep it as upright as it could be. He couldn't afford to be distracted by the goings on of the decades that the outside world functioned in, Irene and her proposals, the doubts that wouldn't leave his mind alone. *I've got one purpose, one goal in this life, and I'm going to fulfill it.*

But as 1964 rolled around, the future didn't seem to be looking much brighter.

Every few weeks, a new wave of monsters found their way to his forest, begging for shelter; thanks to the emissions of automobiles and industries polluting the air, there were places where it had gotten so bad, they'd no choice but to flee. Logs and shrubs and whole trees were moved around to make room—there were days when it looked more like an infirmary than the haven it was meant to be, no matter how hard Jisung tried to pull off the façade. And meanwhile, there were creatures of his own to look out for, animals dying off either quick from a bullet to the wrong place or the slow, steady decline of not enough to eat. Not all killers came with a shotgun.

He could hear Irene's mocking laughter behind his back. *Had enough yet?* it seemed to ask, daring him to let up. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction from all the way across the globe.

Yet even with that determination, he could still hear it every time Handong ran out of fruit to give weary travelers, or a raven flew in with a cough for a caw, or Rowan's ribs flashed underneath his fur, just barely covered by the skin. The graveyard of trees was leering closer with every one that fell, cramping everyone closer and closer until no one could deny the truth. *Just what more can they take from us?*

On the inside, it wasn't all hopeless; nature endured as it always had, made the most of a world trying to trample it. There were many who still had hope for better, who believed that one day they would get to go home. If they believed it, surely Jisung could try his own hand.

He tried, and the morning he did was the morning he saw Minhyuk walking right out of forest limits.

He'd just been climbing down from Byron and Brunhilde's pine after checking in on the family (they'd agreed on naming the brothers Leonardo and Donatello- the dryads were on an art history kick) and looked out to see him heading straight out, suitcases packed, back turned.

"Hey!" Jisung jogged after him; he would've thought Minhyuk hadn't heard, had he not seen the jolt in his shoulders. "Hey. Where're you headed?"

"Uh." Minhyuk swallowed, palmed one of his suitcase handles. "Out."

"Out for what? That's a lot of stuff packed for a round trip. You getting supplies?"

Minhyuk glanced nervously ahead like a deer who'd spotted the hunter, considering all the ways to bolt. "No." Relinquishing his grip on a case, he faced Jisung in full. "I'm getting out."

A splinter drove through his heart, making a fracture. "What?"

"I've been trying to tell you, but- There's this coven, BTOB, up in the Northeast that I met on a run last year, and they invited me to join them. I didn't want to say no."

"So- were..." The fracture, hairline thin, drove deeper. "Were you just going to leave and not tell me?"

"No, of course not. I thought you'd have been helping the nixies move into the brook, but you got a head start, and I guess..."

Minhyuk stammered to find words that would soften the blow. Jisung didn't know if they existed. "It wasn't you, I swear, Sung. You've been an amazing friend."

But not enough for you to stay? "Then why are you going?"

The wince in Minhyuk's grimace was etched in both sadness and regret. "I don't have to say that, do I?"

"Believe me when I say I love this place- I do." Already Jisung could hear the words; he prepared himself for the sting. "But it's dying. The forest is caving in on itself, Jisung. There's barely enough room to hold the original tenants. I know you've done your best, and I'm happy to have helped you as much as I could, but-"

"But what? You can't do it anymore?"

"No. Okay, I can't. I'm not going to spend my whole life tending to it."

"So you're going to leave me to spend my whole life doing it for you?"

"Come on, don't be like that. You don't have to either."

"I don't have a choice."

Minhyuk stared at him- not with affection, but exhaustion. "You really don't want to be anything but a spriggan?"

It was a question Jisung couldn't answer. He didn't have to- he'd already been saying the same thing for years. His mind hadn't changed now.

But Minhyuk's had. "I'll write to you," he promised quietly, squeezing his shoulder before picking his suitcase up again. "Just... don't forget to live."

He left him with that, just a retreating figure and a line he couldn't figure out. *Don't forget to live?* If he wasn't living now, then what the hell was he doing?

"Jisung!" called Soorush- he was one of the newest drifters. "Could you help me move these brambles?"

For now, Jisung thought, watching the top of Minhyuk's head bob down the hill. *Just getting by.* "On my way."

It wasn't like he'd been the first of the originals to leave- or the last. Arlund had flown up South, then Isla into the mountains. Even Lyle had packed up and found a new water source to haunt in Lake Erie.

"Perfect place for him," Handong had joked in an effort to cheer him up. "He'll be able to bother whoever he wants." But Jisung never thought he'd miss him too.

Only a few months after, Gaahei had announced her departure- not so far as the whole Northeast, fortunately, but the equivalent of it.

"You're moving to Portland?"

"Yeah. It's not too far from here- if you need me, I'm just a few hours away," Gaahei replied. "I'll still be around, but... not."

Jisung hadn't quite been able to comprehend it. "And the place you're staying in... is actually cool with monsters?"

"A little town called Eldritch. I've been there a couple times for supply runs- the number of monsters outnumber humans and, from what's known, they either don't know or don't give a shit." She'd looked at him then, hesitantly, wishing she could soften the blow. "You could come around, see it for yourself."

You could, the wind whispered in his ear. *Go with her. Learn what peace looks like again.*

But it sounded too much like a dream. This here- the grass under his feet, the trees in his periphery, the monsters under his roof -was real. "That's okay. I hope you find what you're looking for."

That was why they all came and went, after all. They were looking for something- something stable, warm, reliable, something they thought he could or could not offer.

What was going to happen when suddenly he was worth nothing at all?

Night fell over the forest in a thin veil of coal black that dimmed darker and darker until it blended with midnight. It dusted over the leaves and grass, the bark of every tree and petal of every flower, trailing after Jisung in the weary shadow he left behind as he finally reached his birth tree.

There were no birds on the branches now. Winter was coming- they had long since flown South. The wisteria buds had closed, and yet their fragments of soft, teardrop blue littered the ground in specks, reminiscent of the lives its forest had lost. Jisung only had to touch the trunk to feel the waning tether of life in its heart, pulsing weakly under his fingertips.

"How the mighty have fallen."

With the last bit of strength the day had left him, Jisung curled his hand into a fist. "Leave me be, Irene."

"We both knew I'd be back sometime," Irene replied loftily, as if she'd read the pages of his mind from almost two years ago. "Are you wishing you'd changed your mind sooner?"

Somehow, even with everything going on, he couldn't believe she'd said that.

Jisung looked over his shoulder; there she was, in all her irritating, moonlit, despotic glory, back to a paper birch and looking back like

she'd planned it all out. "Is that why you're here? To brag?"

"Oh, heavens no," Irene laughed. "No, that's far too low for me. I'm merely here to wish my condolences."

Surprised there's even a limit. "For what?"

Her eyebrows raised over a smirk that was way too self-satisfied to keep from growing into a smile. "Um, hello?" An arm was thrown out, gesturing past the clearing to every sorry thing the eye could see. "All of this? Just thought I'd be courteous."

Of course, she was serious. "'Courteous' would be shutting up, turning around, and getting the fuck out of here."

"Well, now, there's no need to be hostile."

"Someone ought to be," he snarled. "Someone has to say to your face what everyone really thinks of you."

"And you are their patron saint." Irene's tone was more than just mocking- it was smug, already victorious. "I'm flattered."

It was no use arguing with her, he knew that. It would only be giving her what she wanted, more fuel to burn off. But now, he was too tired to rein it in. Now, he had to say what he was thinking.

"Why do you feel the need to be like this?" he asked hoarsely. "Why are you so willing to throw someone else under the bus to get what you want?"

"I'll throw the whole legion off a cliff if it gets me what I want," Irene answered deftly. "It's the world we live in- the world I thrive in, and the one you've barely managed to survive in. The difference between you and I is that I know how to do what it takes."

"Then *congratulations*: you have no sense of empathy," he spat. "The difference between you and me is that I *care* what happens to the creatures under my roof."

"Please, are you going to start with that again? Or have you forgotten that I'm spreading my 'roof' throughout the country as we speak?"

"You know what I *mean*. When is the last time you've even been to your forest? Your birth tree?"

"I've hardly the time--"

"- to give a damn about the place you were sworn to protect the day you popped out of the first purple orchid* that fell off the branch? Or the life that came into it, just because you decided it wasn't enough for you? You haven't been a real spriggin in years."

"And you think I envy *you*?" Irene's voice sharpened to a derisive hiss, one that nobody would ever hear in public. "Slaving away in an ecosystem that's been sucked dry and deteriorating of every resource its been given, former glory twelve feet under, dying every day with it? What do you even have to protect anymore? What do you have to *lose*?"

"My *home*! Their safe place! The only world we know that'll accept us." Jisung kept his eyes trained on a fuming Irene, one hand on the bark of the wisteria. "It may be tough to get through at times, but it's a lot kinder than whatever you're offering up."

"All I'm offering is safety. Stability. *Peace*. I know you have none of that- and plenty of others do too, if half the South and a corner of the Northeast mean anything to you."

Obviously, she'd been growing her ranks. "I can make some of my own, thanks."

"You've been trying that for years- it doesn't seem like you have any more of the ingredients for it," Irene simpered. "Maybe it's time to throw in the white flag. This whole *world* could be your forest. Leave the caring for someone else."

She was actually suggesting that. Yeah. The bullshit excuse she'd handcrafted to perfection over years of scheming to get him to concede. All for a spot in a new pyramid plot.

This time, Jisung knew just 'no' wouldn't be the right answer.

He pushed off his tree and charged.

"Okay look, I don't know what demon barged into your forest and cursed you with a rotten fucking apple seed for a heart, but I'm gonna hope you can understand *this*." With no one to defend her, he stopped three feet away from Irene's clenched jaw, her furious whirlwind eyes. "I don't care about spreading some bullshit claim over land that was never mine to begin with. I don't care how many people you convince that you're doing something good here. I *don't care* if it means something solid to hold on to. I was born with a promise I'm going to keep. I've got a whole fucking ecosystem that depends on me keeping this place alive for them, and I'm gonna do that. I will *live* and *die* in this forest until that tree is nothing but a *fucking* stump, and there is nothing I can do about it. So thanks, but no thanks, Irene. I'm staying put."

The words settled like a feather at her feet, falling with the weight of a tree. Irene didn't look at it, didn't retaliate or lash out or lose an ounce of her cool.

"Then perish," she answered simply, in a whisper of wind as she brushed past his shoulder, grazing the wisteria tree with tree careful, deliberate fingertips before she vanished into its shadow- gone, just like that.

Jisung waited for the bark to shrivel, for the flowers to wilt, for the whole organism to burn up in a puff of smoke. But nothing happened. Irene had left behind nothing but her usual omen- and a perfect purple orchid nestled in the blades of grass at his feet, a sign that she was- as always -watching.

1967. He'd waited a whole year for something to happen. But nothing did.

Nothing except for what had been happening for years, anyway: the gradual decline of life in the forest- the slowest death he'd ever seen, and the most tragic. All the trees he couldn't stop from falling, all the creatures he'd helped find somewhere new; there was simply too much for him to watch over. The graveyards of stumps and withered souls had grown, pushing him outwards, plucking the petals off his power until all he could stand to hold close was a single grove on a hill, wisteria in the center, overlooking all that he had failed to protect.

Jisung looked up at the barren branch of the old pine where Byron and Brunhilde's nest was still nestled in the crook. He remembered the day he watched their chicks fly away for good, and the day where a check in ended up being a burial at the roots.

1967, and he had almost nothing left.

Winter had seeped past all his defenses, chilling him to the bone.

Whatever living thing was left in the grove had retreated deep underground or far into the tree trunks to find warmth- the past few weeks of rain had wreaked havoc on their usual dry spots. Slumped against the trunk of the wisteria, watching his breath form clouds, fingers plucking a few pitiful strings on his guitar, he could have been the only one left.

Maybe if I hold on a little longer, it'll get better, he thought blearily. Even if this damn tree was all he had, he'd have something. He wouldn't abandon his home. Irene wouldn't have her way. *Just a little longer.*

Jisung set his guitar off to the side, resting just to the left of him, and closed his eyes, wrapping his jacket tightly around himself. A little longer- that much he could do.

But he saw it before he felt it.

On his right, the dwarf lupine clump, one of the few flowers that still remained, trembling stem to core.

He blinked his eyes open again, rolled up into a crouch. With his fingers pressed to the grass, he could feel the rumbling earth beneath it, waves of energy coming loose from their state of equilibrium, erratically changing tempo. Something was coming- something *big*.

"Hey," he started, voice hollow and rising with panic. "Hey! Everyone, listen up!" A few heads poked out of the ground and trees, some humanoid, some animalistic. "Find some cover, dig down deeper, whatever you need to do to stay safe!" Some of the smaller critters had already launched into duck and cover mode. "I- I'm not sure what's coming, but-

The shriek and hiss of rushing water drowned out his words. Fear gripped his throat, jabbed through his heart.

Jisung turned around, but fast wasn't fast enough- the flood, murky-watered, tall as a mountain and coming from every direction there was- had already burst through the gates, tearing down trees that screamed as they were ripped from the ground, reaching out for them with frothy white claws.

For a moment, it froze in suspension, beautiful and terrible and completely unavoidable. *If I get back, I might be able to help them.*

He got three steps away before he was swept up with them.

The shock of the cold was worse than a thousand winters, worse than any creek or brook or river he'd ever swam in, and Jisung felt it everywhere; in his eyes and bones, every nerve rendered powerless. Its force sent his body tumbling groundlessly backward, brash, untamed, screaming in his ears, prying at his lips to open them.

I won't, Jisung swore, flailing out and skipping like a rock over grass, squeezing his eyes shut against the onslaught.

But a new wave slammed into his chest, knocking his back into a tree and punching the air out of his lungs, forcing his mouth open in a gasp. The water rushed in and he choked on it, pure, relentless ice.

His hands groped numbly against the bark, searching for purchase as he made himself turn, wrap his arms around the trunk and climb up, up against the rushing water, until his head broke through the surface, and his mouth opened for air once again.

The minute he opened his eyes, it was all there, thriving on one ugly mural. Water everywhere, thrashing against drowning paper birch trees, higher than the tallest standing grizzly. There was no way to see where it was coming from- only that it wouldn't stop. *Is this what Irene meant?*

He couldn't even finish the thought before his fingers- gone slick and white knuckled -lost their grip and gave him up to the flood, throwing him down the hill at the speed of an avalanche. His body plunged and rolled until he could no longer tell which way was up if there had ever been one, until he'd smacked his head against dirt and stump so many times that he couldn't see beyond the black spots clouding his vision, until his body finally drifted to a sprawled stop on wet, battered grass and touched air again, let it rouse him up from the earth.

The first thing Jisung moved was his arm- threw it out to grab onto something, anything, and found a stump; he'd reached the graveyard. He used his other to drag him up, crawling feebly like the child he'd never gotten the chance to be until he could crouch at the foot of his former domain, blink the drops out of his eyes to see what it had become.

Byron and Brunhilde's tree had finally fallen, making a bridge from the hilltop to the ground. All the other grove trees were either cracked or snapped in half- beheaded with their crown of leaves gracing the ground. If he looked close enough, he could see the shadows of his neighbors, some moving, some still, mangled where

he hadn't been able to save them. And the center of it all- his birth tree. His beautiful blue wisteria- one of a kind, nothing else like it - had split an irreparable crack in its trunk. All the flowers that hadn't been laved off its branches had wilted, lost their light and splendor. There was no power left to protect it, keep it alive.

I've failed, Jisung thought, letting the realization pull him under. *The one thing I've been told to do with this life, and I failed.*

Just like that, it was over.

There was no use going back to the wreckage- anyone who'd made it out alive would've had the sense to get as far out of Washington as possible, given they'd probably been other places.

Jisung, on the other hand, hadn't. He'd never needed to, never felt curious, not one day in his life. *Where could I possibly go, now that I've got nothing left?*

He gave no mind to where he wandered, just turned around and left; he couldn't bear to look at his ruin of a home any longer. The farther he got the better. The more he walked, the more all the green looked the same. If a bird turned their beak or a squirrel sniffed at his shoe, he walked on. If the road he was crossing had a green light, it made no difference. He didn't need food or water to keep him going. Jisung slept under bridges, in alleys, in caves and under trees, no songs to keep him company. The water had washed every note out of his brain and left him with silence- white noise that swallowed up everything.

Two weeks passed by in a blur; by the time he reached the town, the blisters on his heels had burst, his clothes were torn beyond dingy, and the bones in his body were too weak to hold him upright. By sunset, he didn't have any dignity left to keep him from stepping out of the forest and onto the trod dirt path which took an eternity to cross, read below the garish neon sign that proclaimed, *Rooms open to all!* and slump into the doorbell.

This close to the building, Jisung could hear the laughter that emanated from inside, hear the voices that joked and argued with a friendly affection he hadn't felt in years. He listened greedily, enviously, as if he could somehow take in the sound and embody it for himself. The bushes of baby blue eyes at the edges peered up curiously, mockingly.

The door opened, and Jisung looked up in time to watch the smile drop off the purple-haired man's face, slide into a look of resignation as he leaned against the doorframe, noir striped shirt buttoned below his collarbone. "What the hell happened to you?"

There was no pity on the question, nor in the voice that asked them. Just dry passivity and cool regarding from dark, opaque eyed that had seen so much more than one shaggy-haired, hollow cheeked, dirty-clothed washup.

"Got a spare room?" Jisung asked in a tone that matched. He didn't have the energy to summon anything else.

The man took him in, analyzing every visible speck of dirt on his body, and for a second Jisung considered scaling a tree instead for shelter. But then, without asking if he had any money, he stepped aside. "Get inside."

Jisung came to find out his name was Minho, a djinn who owned the motel with his boyfriend Chan, who happened to be a vampire. He couldn't even find it in himself to appreciate his luck. All he could do was nod along, act through the motions as Chan gave him the key to room 12, shuffled him across the barren courtyard, told him if there was anything he needed, all he had to do was let them know.

"Thank you," he'd mumbled, barely hearing himself. The door closed, and the outside world finally matched the inside: quiet.

For three more days, he didn't unlock the door. On the second, he didn't even leave his bed. They'd come to his door a couple times a day- mostly Chan, sometimes Minho -asking if he was okay, offering

food or drink or fresh clothes. He refused it all. He didn't deserve their kindness, not after what he'd done. *Not when I couldn't pay anyone else back in theirs.*

Hours would pass with him watching the sun rise and set, trying and failing to grow a single sprout between that little crack in the floor- with no birth tree to embody his power, the abilities he'd had before were near nonexistent. He'd lie on his back on the couch, zeroing in on the specks of gray matter in the ceiling until everything else fuzzed out and faded to black and his conscience gave up. What was the point of staying awake? As long as his eyes were open, all he could feel was guilt, emptiness, sadness he didn't deserve. *A whole ecosystem is dead because of me- I shouldn't even be here.*

Jisung had heard whispers- tales through the grapevine, back in the good old days. Of spriggans who'd lost their forests, become detached from their trees. They became swallowed whole by a melancholy no mortal could fathom, dropped to the ground and stayed until their body rotted with the dirt; with no nourishment or will to sustain them, they would calcify, crumble into the earth, leave behind nothing but a sprig of the flower from which they'd been born- a full circle succession.

If I let go completely, Jisung thought, *I won't have to feel it anymore.* He could even join all the ones he'd left. All he had to do was let go.

The fourth night, he unlocked the door as quietly as he could manage, crept out into the courtyard. It wasn't much at all, minus the furniture- just a thin spread of grass, a couple of weeds sprouting, a dandelion here and there -but it would do.

Maybe by giving myself up, I'll be forgiven, Jisung thought, almost fondly, crouching to brush the grass blade by blade with his fingertips. If this was what it took, he wouldn't have to give it another thought.

"So you are alive."

Jisung startled with a squeak he would've denied making had he cared any more. Minho was standing at the edge of the courtyard in silk pajamas that hadn't been in fashion since the 20s, swirling a mug of tea like a wineglass. "What's it to you?"

"Well, given that you're staying under the roof of a motel that I own, it means a great deal. I don't usually do manual room service, but I was considering phasing through the walls for a quick check-up." Jisung waited for the punch line. Minho didn't flinch. "I'm not joking."

Ah. "I thought you guys were about respecting your guests."

"Chan's the polite one. I'm practical." He dropped down next to Jisung, much to his annoyance. "So, what're you doing out here?"

After being shut in for over three days, he means. Jisung hadn't prepared an alibi. "Just... wanted to touch some grass."

"Hm." Minho glanced over the brim of his mug to see that he was doing exactly that. "Another spriggy thing, I assume?"

"Yeah." This had been the longest social interaction Jisung had had in over a month and it was not going good so far. "Did you make yourself tea before or after you decided to nix using the door?"

The corner of Minho's mouth quirked up. "Somewhere in between," he answered. "Always been partial to hibiscus. Ever had any yourself?"

"Couple times." Twice, when Minhyuk was still around to help with supply runs. "But you didn't come out here to talk to me about tea, did you?"

"No, I did not." Minho set the mug aside, faced him in full. "What's your story?"

"My what?"

"Your deal. Your reason for being here, and-or staying in your room for five moons with nothing but the occasional shadow indicating your life status. Everyone here's got one- hell, just three doors down from you, got a guy who ditched chemo to write the novel he'd always dreamed of. Doesn't leave the room, but at least he accepts service."

Jisung scowled into the grass. "Did you ever think that maybe the difference I don't *want* to see anyone?"

"Nothing unrespectable about that. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine too. But, if you do, I could do something about it. Help you out, maybe."

"You could never." Jisung spat the words like snake venom into the ground. "Nothing can help me."

"Dunno. I'd like to think I'm capable of a lot of spectacular things."

"I don't care what cosmic magic you have in your hands," he snarled. "You couldn't imagine what I've been through. How it *feels*."

"I'm sure I could," replied Minho simply, softly. There was no threat in his words, but the darkness they held had a vastness that couldn't be surmised in a single shadow. "Unless you forget what I am, I've had other masters. I've lived other places, not just Levanter. Just as I can't know what you've felt, you can't know what I've seen. But we can both imagine."

And Jisung could. This close to him, he could see the burn on the side of Minho's neck, shaped oddly like a hand. There was no way of knowing who could have given it to him, but a million ways to guess. He shook his head, cutting short the possibilities. "I don't want your pity."

"And you won't get it. If you wanted me to feel sorry for you, you would've already started talking." Minho's eye traced to Jisung's

hand hovering above the grass. “But I sense you already have other plans.”

Jisung felt a start of dread, wondered if this strange creature could read his mind. *In some legends, it's said that djinns receive messages from the stars.* Who could say, how much he really knew? “And is that what you’ve come to do? Stop me?”

“From making a choice that’s yours to make? No.” Minho shrugged. “I just want to know why.”

The cover of midnight was still upon them, the moon still covered by a blanket of clouds. There was still time to carry out his fate, carry on into whatever it made of him. “There’s nothing left for me to stay for,” Jisung whispered. “I’ve lost everything- my family, my home.”

“I heard about a flood down in Bellingham. Was that you?” Hollowly, Jisung nodded. “I’m sorry.”

No pity, he wanted to remind him, but didn’t. “It was bound to happen anyway. Already, it had been getting weaker, day by day. There wasn’t enough to keep me going.” The guilt was surging back, barreling through with anger. “My one duty, my *one* purpose in this world, and I failed it.”

Minho didn’t say anything. He took it in slowly, leniently. “Is that what all spriggans are given?” He asked. “A forest? One ecosystem to protect for as long as they had hold it?”

“A habitat for others. A safe place, a *home*.” Entire lives that balanced on your shoulders. “It’s been passed down for generations.”

”Huh.” Minho leaned back and whistled. “Damn. No wonder you buckled.”

What. “What?”

"You said it yourself. A whole ecosystem to care for on your own, this day and age? It's impressive that you even lasted so long."

Impressive? He'd known spriggans who'd been kicking since the 1800's. "I should've been able to last longer."

"Coming from someone who doesn't know anything about the business, I think you did what you could."

That, coming from someone who hardly knew anything at all. "I let hundreds die. *Hundreds.*"

"If you're still kicking yourself about it, then I'd hardly say 'let' is the right word to use." Jisung glared up at him. Minho went on. "Have you ever wondered why Atlas is kneeling in every caricature of himself?" Jisung didn't answer. "Because the weight of the world is a little much for someone to bear on their own."

Irene did it. Sure, she had her whole shady nature group going, and was probably leering over Bellingham as they spoke, but she managed. "I wasn't strong enough," Jisung rasped thickly. "I couldn't take it. One task, one thing to do, and I couldn't even take it to the finish line. If I can't do that, then I'm not even worthy of life at all."

And Minho didn't launch into a prepared speech. He didn't tell him he was wrong. He didn't even pull his hand from the grass.

He leaned forward, hooked his arms around his knees, and *laughed*.

"Well, shit," Minho chuckled. Under the moonlight, Jisung watched glint of silver dance over his gold cuffs where his sleeves had ridden up. "I might not know you at all, but I know the hell out of that."

Minho rocked back on his heels, crooked cat smile on his face.

"I know what it's like to give. Until you got nothing left. Just one task to fulfill for the rest of forever, and that's it. Not even imagining that there's anything outside of what we already know, because we know

we won't be ready for it. We see all these other people going crazy with their lives and wonder what the hell they're thinking, if they even are at all. Maybe they've got a different purpose. Or maybe they're looking for a different one. Who's to know?"

He spared Jisung one last pensive, weirdly omniscient look over the brim of his mug.

"If taking care of one single forest in a whole world of possibility is all you were meant to do with your life, then I guess it's already over."

Handing Jisung his mug, Minho stretched to his feet, yawned, and promptly blinked out of the courtyard. Inside the mug, the liquid was still steaming; he'd warmed it up for him.

Jisung took his hand from the grass and wrapped both around it, sipped tentatively. Already, even from one sweet taste, he could feel it brewing inside.

The next day, Jisung took a shower.

Not a shabby experience, coming from a guy whose past preferences had been creeks and moderately deep riverbeds. When he got out to an almost immediate knock on the door, he opened it to find a folded green and black flannel and blue jeans tied together with a belt at his feet. The jeans were slightly too big, and he'd had to cut two extra holes in the belt, but it worked out fine.

On walking out into the courtyard, he saw Chan and Minho already at the table- the vampire with what looked like half a liter of solid black, Minho entering with a plate of eggs and bacon.

Chan smiled when he saw him, as if he was relieved to have the chance. Minho pointed his fork. "You. How many days has it been since you've eaten?"

No good morning, just straight to the point. Jisung lifted one finger, then two, then three. Then, hesitantly, four. A doubtful five. Just as he was getting to six, Minho cut him off.

“Too many fingers,” he said. “Take this.”

He shoved his plate at Jisung and dove back to the main room kitchen for more.

Chan’s smile hadn’t budged. “Nice to see you’re rested up.”

He wasn’t looking for any answers; he was just saying what he meant. Jisung pulled up a chair, tried for a smile in return as he picked up a fork. “I had long enough.”

On collecting a map’s worth of locations from Chan, he ventured out to the town of Eldritch for the first time, weaving around colorful produce stand in the markets, through shops and cafes, listening to the music of a community thriving- not as the head of it, but a part of it. The next few days Jisung would spend wandering the library for hours in the botanical section, devouring book after book on flower symbolism and plant magic, checking out whole stacks, learned why he’d grown so many yellow* tulips in the final years, the true beauty of the peony.*

Later that week Jisung asked a lorelai at a fresh herb stall with lotus* flowers in her afro directions to the nearest greenhouse and thanked her with a smile. On walking into Alejandra’s and meeting the madre monte for which it was named, he came back again and again until he had a basket full of seed packets from every plant he’d discovered that he brought back to Levanter and took to its sprawling expanse of a backyard. Using the tools that Chan lent him from the storage room, he put up a fence and started planting, throwing all the growth chemicals into a trashcan fire Minho had been more than happy to provide.

Instead, he used the incantations that he’d been taught in the greenhouse, added to it carefully strummed tunes from the guitar

he'd traded an off-key busker for a clump of trustworthy mushrooms; "Todas las plantas crecen mejor con musica," the madre monte had told him- *all plants grow better with music*. He played soothing songs, some Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel, Mamas & the Papas. Occasionally, he'd get a compliment from whoever was staying at the motel- it couldn't have been more than two weeks since he'd arrived.

All the while, the inner circle of Levanter was thriving too. The grass grew thicker, spread throughout the lawn. The blade became peppered with vibrant meadowflowers, despite not having been touched by a seed. Minho pulled a half-asleep Chan out of room 17 one sunny morning to watch the creeping ivy crawl up the once bare stone pillars, the vampire rubbing his eyes incredulously as buds of morning glories* bloomed in slow motion. He would've been even more surprised to see the same happening outside: new hope coming to life.

And in the backyard, the culprit of it all was singing.

"Listen," whispered Minho, leading Chan down to the main room, where the sliding door to the outside had been left open.

*"I didn't know until now, how dark it really was, cause I never ever let it go,"**

Before a growing congregation of curious critters, the spriggan, grinning wide with his guitar resting on the rolled up sleeves of the flannel he was finally starting to fill out, played the song he'd been writing in his mind about nothing else other than the world he'd created here in this private little space.

"Now I feel relaxed, I like it, this feeling, and I'll never ever let it go,"

Chan rested his head on Minho's shoulder, both of them fine to be in the audience, to watch it unfold.

"I like the view right now,"

Though all he had with him was a guitar, it seemed as if the rest of the forest was amplifying the sound, the wind carrying the notes to the dormant windows of the town, making them open.

"I like the view right now,"

Even the trees tended towards him; the stalks of young flowers stretched a little higher, the squirrels and raccoons and rabbits skittering closer as Jisung laughed.

"I like the view right now,"

It had taken so long. This was just the beginning- the start of a new start, a seed turning to a sprout, a single wisteria flower being carried by a breeze from miles north coming to rest in a new place- but for the first time in a long time, Jisung felt like he finally did.

This Is Home - Cavetown

*I Want To Hold Your Hand - The Beatles

*Another Day - Stray Kids

*The View - Stray Kids

*Dwarf lupine: Abundance, growth, change.

*Allium: Unity, prosperity, heartbreak.

*Orchid: Beauty, refinement, mature charm.

*Yellow tulip: Desperation, hopeless love.

*Peony: Peace, blissful love.

*Lotus: Rebirth, new beginnings.

*Morning glory: Strength, resilience, birth of a new day.

Fire for You

Chapter 23: Fire for You

Aaaand BACK to the present we go! Mostly.

A little over a week since the boys have started rooming with Got7, and so far we're chilling. But with the return of an unfortunately familiar enemy, we start to get some more current events in perspective.

Is it possible that you'll cry? Maybe. Is it possible that I will be crying with you? Definitely.

My heart just dropped

Thinking about you,

The world just stops,

When I'm without you

I was on fire for you...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

There had never been anything holy about the coven of Stray Kids' time on earth, but for the first time, they had a reason to believe in the lucky number seven.

Over the past week, the inner circle had become the prime spot for the morning congregation- which wasn't as refined as it sounded. Really, it was just a way for everyone to get their three am-awake-at-

night thoughts out of their heads before the day required any actual productive activity out of them.

"So, you're really into plant symbolism, eh?" asked Jinyoung, half investigation half interest.

"Oh, hell yeah," Jisung answered readily. "With the resources Eldritch had on hand, it helped make up for the power I couldn't summon on my own until I was strong enough again. You guys really have some choice greenery out here."

"Really?"

"Yeah! Combine history with magic and all that other biological shit, and it makes for something both beautiful and substantial." Jisung raced over to the fountain. "Lotus flowers- peaceful symbolism, gives good vibes, also serves as vacation homes for frogs." Then to the arch window. "Plum blossoms- symbol of resilience, blooms at best during winter. Knew a friend who made a good harvest." From his jacket, he chuckled a travel-size guide. "Think fast!"

It was through decades of handling a coven that Jinyoung only fumbled once with the book. When he looked up to see where Jisung was, the spriggen was already headed for the backyard.

"If you want to know anything else, it's a good place to start!"

Meanwhile, chilling by the pillars:

"Being a user of both air *and* shifter magic," started Jeongin, "would you describe it as double majoring?"

"Have you even been to college?" asked Jaebum.

"No, but I won a PSU frat dance battle once."

Jaebum chuckled. "Something like that. They're both just skills you're born with. The shifting comes easier, since it's kinda just like

changing clothes, whereas teaching yourself an element's like learning a whole other function."

"I still remember the first time I summoned lightning. Jeongyeon wouldn't let me near anything metal for a week."

"Why don't you use it more often?"

"Well, if I did, not only would Levanter's electrical bill go through the roof, but it'd lose its purpose of being used when necessary. Lightning only strikes the same place once for a reason."

"You're very mature for your age," noted Jaebum.

"Thanks, it's the trauma."

They were almost instantly cut off by Changbin and Jackson storming down their path, caught up in a very heated debate.

"I bet I can," Jackson was arguing.

"I bet you *can't*," Changbin taunted.

"You really willing to bet those odds? I was riding through hurricane weather while your ass was still jamming to Great Balls of Fire."

"Before it was cool, in hell. Learn about your opponent before you size them up."

"Very well." Jackson crossed his arms. "Whoever can bench press the most island turtles before nine makes the other guy motorboat across the Gulf to get a Doberge cake for the whole gang."

"*Bet.*"

Above their heads, Seungmin and Marky hacky-sacked an apple around the courtyard, reliving the more simple things in life.

"I was a tame child for my age," Seungmin went on, underhanding the apple back up to Mark. "But even then, I still enjoyed a little fun."

Up on the roof shingles, Mark spun the fruit on his finger like a basketball. "You stole their flashlights at exactly ten at night. That's more than a little fun."

"Hey, I don't know how that Mormon cult ended up in backwoods Montana, but Wonpil and I intended to make it a trip they wouldn't forget. Now how about you? Surely you've got some notable pranks worth teaching."

The leshy hummed, thinking on that one. "Had to be that proposal." Seungmin's jaw dropped. "Come on, it wasn't that bad! Two girls, chased them into a river, got an ax to the arm, it was worth it. From what I could see, she still said yes, so. Nothing too bad." The jaw still hadn't picked itself up. "You alright?"

"I was about to say 'internalized homophobia, methinks,' but I thought better of it."

Felix and Youngjae had taken to the living room couches for a more Smashbros approach to the day.

"So even as a freelance, you're still hearing what goes on?" asked Felix, throwing in a combo as Cloud.

"Bits and pieces, yeah," said Youngjae, putting Rosalina on the defensive. "As you can expect, not much changes with the world of the afterlife, but Limbo's been getting emptier, might be exorcised completely from the rings- greater powers don't really care anymore whether or not you believe in God."

"Okay, okay."

"People've finally started going to hell for animal cruelty- that's been lumped in with Anger."

"Yes, yes, love it."

"And there's been apparently a weird surge of angels with English and Welsh accents? Apparently it's more calming to dead souls." Felix nodded approvingly. "How did you end up with an Australian accent? Never asked before."

"I was crafted from ether above the southern hemisphere. Part of an experiment, but hey. Worked for me."

Youngjae wasn't the only one filling in the blanks- Chan was doing the same for Bambam on Eldritch.

"*Goddamn*," Bambam swore in amazement. "They're finally opening up a Voodoo Doughnuts out there?"

"About time," said Chan proudly. "I mean, everyone's had theories about one of the owners being a demon, but this could answer them once and for all."

"Damn. And no crazy Levanter stories?"

"I don't think you want to hear about an entire pack of yaoguai insisting on staying in room 27 for four nights straight, so I'll just say it was an experience for everyone."

"Alright then," Bambam nodded. "And... no word on the inner workings?" Chan's brows furrowed. "Texted Sana telling her you were out here. She said to wish you luck, but on what?" Chan blinked. Stepped into the shadow of Mark's guest-greeting pine. "Damn it, Chan, you get out that tree this instant and *face me!*"

Hyunjin glared furiously off in the direction that Jisung had led Jinyoung to, blabbering excitedly about azaleas and other botanical wonders.

"He doesn't have to interrogate him like that," the siren muttered. "It's not like we're together, or anything."

"What a shame, what a shame," mused Yugyeom in a timely reply.

"I mean, come on, just because I said *one thing* about him at breakfast, doesn't mean it *matters*."

"Thorough men like to make thorough background checks."

"Seriously, though." Hyunjin peeked out from behind the pillar. "Does he really think he would hurt me?"

"I knew you were trouble when you walked in," hummed Yugyeom.

"What?"

In a recliner away from it all, Minho was channeling his inner cat lady through Bambam's cats.

"So ridiculous, aren't they?" he cooed, scratching King's head on the floor as he stroked Pudding's back. "So silly. Running around and scratching at each other for years like they *don't* lie awake at night thinking about each other. Even I didn't do that as long as they did. Opposites attract my ass." Latte had jumped on the armrest; Cupcake was yowling for attention as well. "They can keep up the act, that's for sure, but we all know the truth. They don't really hate each other. They're just that similar- maybe if they really talk it out, they'll know how the other feels." Minho laughed as the Sphinx cat started purring. "Now if we could just get that stupid cult out of the picture, then maybe we could really get somewhere."

And maybe Minho had jinxed it. Maybe the higher powers wanted to get back at them for all the sin and drudgery they had so happily committed. Maybe it had been bound to happen anyways.

But when a ring of thorn harpoons latched onto the curved edges of the roof faster than Mark could say "What the *fuck*," there wasn't much of another conclusion to come to.

One by one, they hauled themselves over like the Huns descending The Great Wall- dryads, elves, gnomes, any monster who had sprung from a natural ground source all in different decades of dress; a 70's silk shirt here, a 90's permed head there. Each one wore at least one article of green.

The boys startled out of their activities, older pushing younger behind their backs. Chan dropped out of a pillar shadow, tried to see what was going on but was shoved back by a leering wood elf. Minho shot to his feet, cats yowling in concern. Changbin and Jackson rushed in and were stopped immediately by two golems- who'd literally transformed their arms into the jagged peaks of javelins.

"Five minutes we're gone, and this happens," grumbled Changbin.

"I don't think that's the issue," Mark replied. His smile had stepped off the cliff of his face, making way for a storm.

The doors creaked with a reverberation that sliced through the whole courtyard. When the spriggan herself threw them open, paraded through like a queen from her carriage, the harpoon intruders folded into a bow.

Xiaojun and Hendery at her side, Irene surveyed her scene of entrance, deemed it satisfactory. "I must say, for an impromptu hideaway, this is a very fetching location."

"Did she just try to make fetch happen?" whispered Felix, yelping with Youngjae at a glare shot his way by a meliai.

Jisung burst in from the backyard alongside Jinyoung, face pale, green eyes fervid and panicked. "Irene. What- what're you doing here?"

"Pause up." Yugyeom made his hands into a time-out gesture.
"That's Irene?"

"Apparently," muttered Hyunjun, studying her with unveiled contempt.

"Damn it."

"Why else would I be here, dearest?" Irene's gown was emerald gossamer woven to silk, patterned with ferns and poison ivy. Merge that with her killing smile, and the whole ensemble was sharp as a dagger. "I came to welcome you to Louisiana."

"B-But." Jisung grappled through his mind for more; the terror was blown open wide on his face. "How did you know I was here?"

"How have I known you were in Eldritch? How did I know you've moved south from there? I simply followed the trail which I was given." Irene's smile splayed wider. "Besides, it's important for a proprietor to keep tabs on their land."

"You got control of Louisiana?"

"Still trying to win over Baton Rouge. But a couple of my dryads were useful informants."

She waved a hand to her disciples. A squadron of girls with unruly, almost mossy curls cackled like witches, grinning evilly under their lichen freckles. One of them split a wink at Changbin, and Jackson pushed the demon behind him before he could become too openly perplexed.

Backed by her henchmen, Irene strode forward, taking roll of who was present. "I see we have the vampire in our midst." Chan growled, held back as he started out. "And the genie, of course, never too far away." A furious spark flashed through Minh's eyes. "Lovely to see you again, Mark."

"Kindly go fuck yourself, Irie," Mark quipped tersely.

At the barb, Irene didn't even bristle. "A couple new faces as a diversion, but it seems everyone is here," she moved on. "Angel, imp, kit, werepup-" Her words stopped as her eyes landed on Hyunjin, guarded fiercely by a pair of thorny acalicas. Slowly, menacingly, her lips spread into a chuckling grin. "Now *there* he is," she purred. "The Bermuda siren of Eldritch." She slipped her smirk, across to Jisung, whose horror had elevated to anger. "You always did have such a weakness for pretty things."

Enraged, Jisung stormed towards her- Jinyoung couldn't stop him fast enough- sweeping Xiaojun and Hendery out of the frame with the single sudden lash of a tree root from the ground.

"You keep him out of this," he seethed through gritted teeth, a fist's width away from her. "You keep *all* of them out of this."

"Oh, don't be silly," Irene chided blithely, smoothing down his jacket collar where it had turned up. "My soldiers are only set pieces- all I needed them to do was intimidate." When she patted his shoulder, her hand stayed, nails digging in through the denim. "And to send a message."

Irene released him with a backwards shove into Jinyoung's steadying grip. "To the tenants of The Fortunate Isles, you need know only this," she boomed in a theater ready voice. "As a possessor with direct rule over this land, I and my troops will be staying here as long as we require until our needs are met." Her eyes found Jisung's with steely, unyielding intent. "And until I get the audience which I am owed."

She spun on her heel, and her troops rose up, tugged on their harpoons and noped out the same way they had came. Grumbling to their feet, probably something about finding new careers, Xiaojun and Hendery kept the doors open for Irene, who sauntered out humming victoriously:

*"Tall and tan, and young and lovely,"**

"The girl from Ipanema goes walking,"

"And when she passes he smiles," Irene sent a knowing look towards Hyunjin as she drifted out the exit, *"but she doesn't see..."*

The doors shut, draining the courtyard of all its early morning bliss. "What was that all about?" Hyunjin wondered aloud, looking for Jisung, but the sprigman was already gone- headed for the bedrooms, deliberately avoiding his gaze.

Past - 2018

"Okay, I mean this politely," Hyunjin began, "but you look like you're about to throw up."

"Well, I'm meeting all seven of your roommates!" Daewhi protested. "Am I not allowed to feel some unease?"

"I told them I was bringing you over last week- you're not a surprise. Besides, they've met a lot of half elves in their time."

"But *I* don't know any of *them*."

"That's not true! You talked to Jeongin over the phone."

"Two exchanged 'hi's' which lasted for about five seconds before he went back to pig slaughtering in the background."

"I told you, that was Spirited Away. He and Seungmin have a thing for Studio Ghibli."

Daewhi breathed in, puffed out. "A quick rundown, just so I know what I'm facing?"

Hyunjin chuckled. "Chan and Minho- vampire and djinn -run Levanter, been together since the dawn of time. Changbin's the demon, looks like he could break your hand with a fist bump, but he's a softie. Felix, angel in every sense of the word, literally the

nicest guy you'll meet. Jeongin and Seungmin are kinda the light-and-dark disaster duo, will talk shit about you behind your back, but not too much if you make a good first impression. And Jisung-" A twinge in his heart. *Stupid hair and verdant eyes over a chipped troublemaker's smile.* The only thing that made him feel wrong about Daewhi's hand in his. "Spriggan. Indie-rock world-peace kind of guy. Annoying at first, but he grows on you. Harmless."

"Sounds harmless." Daewhi took in the grain of the door, shot a smile over his shoulder. "I'll try not to embarrass you too much."

Maybe it was a rash decision, inviting over a guy you'd only been seeing for two and a half weeks to meet the family, especially so close to Valentine's Day. But when Chan opened the door with a grin worth no less than a million, he felt confident enough to say, "Don't worry about that."

As far as first meet dinners went for guys with varyingly different definitions of 'back in my day,' the whole ordeal went pretty well. Since Minho and Felix had fixed them up with a vegetarian stir fry, Daewhi made sure to compliment their efforts. Seungmin didn't seem too suspicious on the answers he gave when asked about his backstory, and Changbin (with some skepticism) dropped the bad cop act only thirty minutes in. Jeongin laughed at the Kiki's Delivery Service reference Daewhi made over herring salad. Even Jisung looked somewhat impressed at his recognition of seitan in the stir fry. *That* had to be a good sign.

Especially if the spriggan had spent half the night sneaking shadowy looks at Daewhi when he thought no one was looking.

"Y'know, I like to keep a tally on the people I think would 'borrow' my pen," Seungmin murmured, watching Daewhi leave through Hyunjin's bedroom window. "But I think he'd actually keep his word."

Hyunjin giggled. "I'll take that as your stamp of approval."

"I liked him," announced Felix, scratching Kkami's ears on his bed.
"He's nice, well-read, assertive."

"You made a good match with this one," said Chan, smiling amiably from the doorway.

If half the jury was already in on that matter, then maybe this had been a good night after all.

The others retired into their rooms- a cloudy sky on a gray night was a sure sign of a storm. But when Hyunjin found Jisung up on the roof overlooking the backyard, he didn't look like he was leaving anytime soon.

"So." Hyunjin peeked around to get a look at his face. "What did you think?"

Jisung didn't turn, didn't look at him, but the edge of his jaw was traced with silver. "As a Washington native, weather like this means showers for probably a week."

"You know what I mean." Hyunjin had gotten close enough to see the round curve of his cheek, his nose, tufts of hair brushing his eyes.
"About Daewhi. What'd you think about him?"

Jisung's features made up something unreadable- a cross between indifference and amusement for a reason Hyunjin couldn't parse. He shrugged. "He's nice."

A breeze passed through the sky. "That's it?"

He scoffed. "Would you like me to say more?"

"Well, I don't *know*, I figured you'd have a little more than just 'nice.'"

"And if I don't?"

"He's a living being- he had to have made some impression. Would you want me to give you some pointers?"

Jisung rolled his eyes. "From what I could tell, he's friendly."

"Like a labradoodle."

"Skittish, but he got on fine with the others."

"Passed the test with muted colors."

"Didn't seem bothered by the fact that you were born when his grandparents got married."

"Not gonna R Kelly this, so I'm just gonna stick with fuck you."

The corner of Jisung's mouth turned up. "And, for the most part, agreeable."

"And we all know how hard that is for you to say."

Jisung looked at him over his shoulder. "I think the question worth asking is why are *you* asking for my approval."

"I was just making sure I hadn't introduced someone who you might strangle with tree roots if I decided to bring him around."

"Really?" His head cocked, issuing a challenge. "Is that all?"

Hold your head high, pass the checkpoint. "Just making sure."

"Don't waste your breath. I'll save the work for someone who deserves it." In the glance he slipped across, the indifference misted over. "'Sides. You like him, right?"

What would you do if I said no? "Yeah."

"Then alright."

"Alright." If Hyunjin were a bit less of a little shit, he might've left well enough alone. But the chance at hand was simply too irresistible to pass up. "So what's wrong?"

A twitch in his shoulders. "What're you talking about?"

"Whatever you were thinking with all those looks at Daewhi." His lips parted. "Don't deny it- I saw them." Shut. "Was it something he did?"

"No."

"Come on, the others liked him."

"And they're right to."

"Then what? I mean, obviously, he's not perfect, he did relate baptism to that one Grey's Anatomy scene, but-"

"It's not about him." Jisung rounded on Hyunjin, face to full body. "It's about why the fuck you think he deserves you."

The roof beneath Hyunjin's feet seemed to concave. "What?"

"There's nothing wrong with Daewhi. He's fine. Just like most people are fine. Some people can live a whole life full of fine and be okay with that, but you? You're- Jesus, Hyunjin, you're *you*," Jisung resounded the word in his face; it could have filled the whole sky. "You memorized the entire Circus album the day it came out. You can make flowers grow with your voice. You could change the tides if you wanted to. You deserve to be with someone who makes you feel like you've been struck by fucking lightning. Don't you dare settle for fine!"

The words rumbled through the clouds as thunder resonating above their heads, like Zephyr the West Wind had wanted them to echo. They swirled around Hyunjin, pinned him to the ground, set him staring into Jisung's green eyes, brash and beautiful and clear as a forest brook. He'd been looking for an explanation, another silly argument, something to stamp out the spark. *What the fuck am I supposed to say to that?*

Jisung dropped his gaze to the floor, tracked his way as he went to leave. "Just think about it," he said softly, gone sheepish without a response.

Hyunjin watched him walk farther and farther away, Docs crunching on the gravel, stupefied as any idiot who'd ever been struck speechless. Thoughtlessly, he blurted, "Jisung?"

And the spriggan stopped. Turned his head. "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

And just like that, Hyunjin found himself looking into the very predicament he'd been dreading at the door with Daewhi: eyes, hair, smile and all. And for the life of him, he couldn't look away.

"Anytime." Behind Jisung, the sky split briefly with a bolt of white- a lightning strike.

He swung down off the roof, leaving Hyunjin standing there, wishing he could move. This always happened- every time he thought he could fight it, that he'd moved on. But this time was different; he couldn't shove it back down. He felt like he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him and wanted to scream about it to his bedroom walls, but he was locked in place, immobilized and unable to do anything but face what he'd known all along.

All the hells, Hyunjin thought. It's him.

It was a terrible thing, to wonder if you were in love.

For one thing, you couldn't unconsider it. Once you turned your face to it and looked it in the eye- even for a *second* - there was no switch to turn it off. It was the sleep paralysis demon that followed you around, stayed with you even when you locked the door, chained itself to you with a red thread and refused to reveal the lock.

Hyunjin took approximately three business days consisting of pacing his room, murmuring half-formed nothings into the carpet, trying to sort his pan-fried noodle lump of a brain into something he could make sense of. There had to be something he could do about this- he couldn't just let himself fall off the deep end completely. There was a difference between attraction and actual desire, there *had* to be. He'd been convincing himself of that for years.

He knew he liked Jisung, of course- he'd known since the minute he'd turned Hyunjin's solo into a duet on a fateful firefly-lit night all the way back in 1985. There wasn't really a way to look at his faux bad boy image, crooked smiles, and horrible slapstick sense of humor and feel nothing. But it wasn't fear that was holding him back, heavens no. It was logic.

If this was just a crush, he couldn't go risking everything over it- the heart had to take a backseat for the head. Logic was knowing that yes, Jisung liked guys, and flirted around with every member of the coven on an almost daily basis, but that didn't automatically mean he liked him. Maybe he was just naturally poetic and annoyingly genuine in the ways that all writers were- so good at making words into an art form that something as world-shattering as '*don't you dare settle for fine*' was just a simple pep talk. Maybe he really did just want the best for him.

But then there was the possibility that he *did* (a possibility that Hyunjin refused to let himself think about unless he wanted to stop breathing). A realm where all the years of analyzing and reading into actions were actually proven true- a reality where they could actually be together. It could go well- it could be wonderful, maybe even perfect -all save for the fact that Jisung was, and always would be, unless God smashed Levanter with a wrecking ball, his roommate.

They'd spend so much time together, doing everything that people who dated did, that they'd forget how to just be friends. They'd integrate each other into their lives and learn things that even the others didn't know- things that you only tell people you think you'll never lose. But something would go wrong. Something always did;

something would happen, would remind them why they had hated each other so much in the first place, and it would be over.

That, Hyunjin imagined, would leave behind wounds that couldn't be healed with a song.

He'd tried to pay attention instead to guys who seemed to like him for the right reasons, ignore the twist in his chest whenever Jisung shot one of his twinkly smiles at someone who wasn't him. It was for the best, anyways- surely a being he spent half his day bickering with couldn't be the one to stop Hyunjin in his tracks.

But then he thought of Jisung, and *oh*.

He thought of Jisung, and something uncoiled in his chest. He thought of Jisung's voice low in the early mornings, crooning to his hospice animals. Jisung's hands, gently callused from strumming acoustic guitars and raising life from the earth. His lips, captivating in smiles and smirks and filthy spat curses. His broad shoulders and inward stance and narrow waist, the look in his impossibly green eyes when he turned his head to shoot a challenging glare in his direction, his-

Hyunjin flopped facefirst on his bed, startling Kkami from her sleep, groaning with profound pain and misery. This couldn't possibly be any more hopeless- even with Daewhi in the picture.

But then Valentine's Day came along, and it turned out things actually could get worse.

Cupid's Unbirthday, as Minho explained it to Seungmin, was an annual celebration hosted at Love Cherry Motion where couples, singles, and all the wackjobs in between went in order to say that they had, in fact, done something with their Valentine's Day.

"You get a free shot themed shot for every love song you perform," added Felix. "It's the best." The shot in question was the famed Cupid's Elixir, which could have only been described as a Starbuck's

pink drink spiked with vodka, cider, champagne, and something a regular described to them as 'milk from the tits of our own Virgin Mary.'

It had been Jeongin who innocently suggested that Hyunjin invite Daewhi to come along. Which was the natural thing, he guessed. They were still going out, after all, since he hadn't had the spine to dump him before Valentine's Day.

Hence their booth for eight got a ninth chair pulled up to it, with a lingering air of guilt to go. Jisung had been right- there really wasn't anything wrong with Daewhi. He just wasn't the right one for him.

In the meantime, though, there was a party to enjoy.

Hailing from a coven who picked their songs months in advance for preparation, it wasn't hard. With much persistence, Chan was able to get Seungmin onstage for a duet of Shallow*.

"I'm falling," Chan lined out, arm around Seungmin, whose stage fright was gradually fading. *"And in the good times, I feel myself longing for a change."* Through the refrain, he stepped away. *"And in the bad times, I fear myself,"*

Chan pointed, and Seungmin threw all his newfound courage into, *"I'm off the deep end,"* with the whole gang cheering to, *"Watch as I dive in,"* while Chan devoted his own presence to getting the rest of the bar to hype him on, *"I'll never meet the ground,"*

Then it was Changbin passing a salute off to the team and storming the stage with Heartbreak Hotel,* stealing a few hearts of his own as he did.

"Now if your baby leaves you," Changbin roared into the pink flashing ceiling, *"Then you've got a tale to tell,"*

"Just take a walk down lonely street, down to Heartbreak, down to Heartbreak,"

The crowd harmonized with the stomp of his red Chuck sneaker into, *"Heartbreak Hotel's got me!"*

He accepted the shot as it arrived, grinning guilelessly at a gaping Felix, who knew a 2000's jukebox musical when he heard one. The angel swallowed, clamped his mouth shut. "Fuck this." He turned to Jeongin. "It's time."

The LCM crowd wasn't even given a chance to recover before the two of them kicked the doors open to none other than crowd pleaser, fan favorite, chaos inciting, Cake By The Ocean*.

"Talk to me, baby," they sang back to back, both Changbin and Seungmin beyond losing it. *"I'm going blind from this sweet, sweet craving, whoa,"*

"Let's lose our minds and go fucking crazy,"

"I-I-I-I-I keep on hoping we'll eat cake by the ocean,"

Afterwards, Felix toasted his earned glass to Jinsoul. Jeongin politely turned down his in favor of the giant bowl of cherry Jell-O leftover from the house special Jell-O shots, which he shared with Seungmin. Of course, that was when Minho remembered he had a reputation to uphold.

Thus, he decided to amplify Chan's seventy-year-long gay panic and launch his own performance with Make Me Feel*, one of Janelle Monae's most classic masterpieces.

"It's like I'm powerful, with a little bit of tender," the djinn lined out, striding down the catwalk to a fanfare. *"An emotional sexual bender,"*

By *"Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better,"* Chan was already melting on the vinyl cushions while the rest of his coven grooved to the music.

"There's nothing better,"

Minho dropped a glittery wink, and the whole crowd screamed.
"That's just the way you make me feel."

"Do all the numbers usually get this..." Daewhi trailed as Chan welcomed Minho back into the booth, the heart eyes emoji personified. "Racy?"

"On holidays like this, people like to take advantage of the vibe," Felix answered easily.

The 'vibe' that Felix was referring to had inspired enough people to fill the lineup with more love songs than Hyunjin had heard in his whole life, whether they were upbeat or sad or straight up unhinged. Usually there wasn't too strong of an in-between.

But then it was Jisung's turn to perform, and the beginning to How Long* cued up to scarlet red spotlights as the crowd cheered it on. Hyunjin's entire thought process dumbled down to, singularly: *fuck*.

"I'll admit, I was wrong," Jisung sang low, illuminated in a sheen of bloodred, a devil born from stage smoke. *"What else can I say, girl, can't you blame my head and not my heart?"*

"I was drunk, I was gone, that don't make it right, but I promise there were no feelings involved,"

He grinned through the guitar riff, raked his hair back, and Hyunjin felt that same bolt of lightning zap him through.

Good Lord, what am I doing? Daewhi was literally five inches away. His whole coven was right there. Just a week ago, he'd been having a crisis over this whole situation. Hyunjin had to keep some kind of grip.

But God, how was he supposed to think when Jisung, the crisis himself was turning the platform of Love Cherry Motion into hell's ballroom floor, captivating the room with a falsetto he never even knew he was capable of, eyes gleaming vibrantly over a lopsided

smile that could have charmed an executioner, golden skin glistening under a shine of crimson luster and light sweat, moving like-

"Did you hear me?" asked Daewhi.

"Huh?"

"I said he's really good."

"Yeah." Hyunjin looked back up at the stage, at Jisung and the black denim-red flannel jacket he always wore on Valentine's Day, the American Idiot shirt he wore under it which Changbin had encouraged him to cut the sleeves off of; the exact image of a nightmare. "He is."

Through *"How long has this been going on?"* Jisung moved down the catwalk like he owned it, almost the way Minho did, but his confidence was different. This was a side of him that rarely ever showed full on display, out for the world to see as he reveled in it. *How could I take my eyes away from that?*

"You've been creeping 'round on me, while you're calling me baby,"

"How long has this been going on,"

"You've been acting so shady, I've been feeling it lately, baby,"

If the others had noticed Hyunjin being unable to do anything but stare, they didn't say a word. The lot of his roommates seemed to be too busy jamming: Chan filming like the soccer mom he lived to be, Minho wolf-whistling from his seat, ChangLix shoulder-swerving to the beat while SeungIn grooved politely with their bowl of Jell-O.

Yet as the song went on, Hyunjin was able to look past pressing details such as the space where Jisung's jacket collar revealed the column of his neck and actually listen to the lyrics. Sure, they didn't seem relevant on the surface (unless there was an ex in the area who needed to reveal themselves), but there had to be some

explanation as to why, when the second verse neared its end, Hyunjin could have sworn before any jury that Jisung looked right at him, with that look that voice and those *fucking* eyes and sang, "*You're the only one I wanna love,*"

Hyunjin was about to dial up any fairy godmother on duty and ask her just how he was going to deal with that when- "*Hyunjin!*"

He jumped half a foot out of his skin. Daewhi was looking at him again- but instead of oblivious, he was livid. "What is it?"

"What's been going on with you lately?"

Shit. "W-Wha-"

"You've barely talked to me since the dinner that *you* made me come to, you call me out of the blue and ask me to come to this karaoke night, and then you hardly even look at me. Did you even want me here?"

"I-" Hyunjin forced down the lump in his throat, tried to block out the music. *This isn't how it's supposed to go.* "Daewhi, I can explain."

"Save it." The half elf roughly pushed out of his chair, shrugged on his jacket. He shot one last disdainful look over his shoulder at Jisung tearing his way through the chorus. "At least I know who you really want now."

Of course. It had been written all over his face. "Daewhi, wait!"

But he was already out the door, shoving past customers who couldn't have paid him any more mind had they been sober.

Hyunjin got up to follow, not a game plan in his mind, when the lights stopped flashing and dimmed out to blackness. He looked around, and every ray of light had been trained on Jisung kneeling in the center, veiling him with it, like a statue showered with the dust of a red moon.

This time, there was no question that he was looking at Hyunjin.

"She said, 'Boy tell me honestly,'" Jisung sang, as if he were speaking to him in secret. "Was it real or just for show?"

He rose up and hundreds of eyes followed with bated breath. *"She said, 'Save your apologies.'"*

"Baby, I just gotta know,"

With a look like a miracle, jacket slipping down his bare shoulder, his voice rang out,

"How long has this been going on?"

Hyunjin stared. The boys cheered.

"You've been creeping 'round on me," crashed over the congregation like a tsunami wave, and the whole bar exploded with sounds of laughter and applause during *"While you're calling me baby."* Jisung was the riot embodied, carrying it out like he'd been born to, leaving Hyunjin staring after him, wondering how he'd never been able to see it before. *"How long has this been going on,"*

"You've been acting so shady,"

"I've been feeling it lately, baby."

The song ended, and Jisung folded into a bow, smiling that twinkly, shit-eating smile, knowing exactly what he'd done.

Now, Hyunjin thought, as his conscience slowly streamed back to him, *I can't just let him get away with that.*

Jisung's shot didn't even touch the table before Hyunjin snatched it up and knocked it back, feeling whatever the Virgin Mary had contributed soak in with the alcohol.

"Any particular reason for that?" asked Jisung dryly. He hadn't even sat down yet.

"You didn't really think you could whip out a performance like that and not get shown up for it, did you?"

Hyunjin turned around without elaboration to his bewilderment, nodded to Jinsoul and crossed up the stage. The drums kicked off in time with his boots scaling the steps: hard, ominous bass like the stamping sound of the story villain's entrance followed up with a sinful guitar intro. The audience resurrected its screaming all over again, pulled his coven's jaws slack, made Jisung forget all about his stolen shot.

In the light of a shadow, Hyunjin bit his smile as it grew, the lights shifting to a motley of red and black; already applause, and he hadn't even said a word. *The Arctic Monkeys have always produced the perfect bar room jams.*

"Have you got color in your cheeks,"* he crooned, the power of his voice washing over the crowd like a current on the moon's tide.

"D'you ever get that fear that you can't shift the tide that sticks around like summat in your teeth?"

"Are there some aces up your sleeve?"

"Heyo," Jeongin hooted, raising his ladle in attendance. Seungmin just laughed.

"Have you no idea that you're in deep," Hyunjin's eyes slipped across to Jisung, dark as malachite and beckoning, *"I've dreamt about you nearly every night this week."*

As he asked *"How many secrets can you keep?"* Jisung peeked at Changbin and Minho to be sure, only to see them looking quizzically back at him.

"Where'd Daewhi go?"

"You didn't notice?" said Changbin. "He left, like, right in the middle of your song."

"What? Why?"

"Dunno. Seemed like a while coming," replied Minho. "But it sounded it was because he couldn't stop looking at you."

The djinn nodded up at Hyunjin, who was grinning for his audience, flawlessly retying his hair through, *"spilling drinks on my settee."*

"Oh," chirped Jisung. "Oh God."

"Do I wanna know?" The bar crowd chorused.

"If this feeling flows both ways," sang Hyunjin in response.

"Sad to see you go." Going by the wink he passed to Jisung, he didn't seem to be talking about Daewhi. *"Was sort of hoping that you'd stay."*

By *"Baby, we both know,"* the whole establishment was singing with *"That the nights were mainly made for saying things that you can't say tomorrow day,"*

Chan patted his shoulder. "Buckle in, buddy boy."

Which was exactly two seconds before Hyunjin tore the mic off the stand.

"Crawling back to you," he sang into the uproar. *"Ever thought of calling when you've had a few? Cause I always do,"*

"Maybe I'm too busy being yours to fall for somebody new. Now I've thought it through."

The minute Hyunjin started down the catwalk, Jisung knew he was fucked.

He knew for a fact that he didn't have the guts. The closest he'd ever gotten was half a minute ago, talking riddles up on that stage, a blessed three minutes where it felt like he could say anything. Definitely not now with Hyunjin behind the microphone, red hair in waves, every inch a siren of the myths fitted to black jeans, smirking merciless into *"Simmer down and pucker up."* Out of his periphery, Changbin downed a way too long gulp of soju, possibly to relieve himself of the sight. Jisung, positively molten under red lights, might've done the same thing if he could take his eyes away.

How did he know what Hyunjin meant by *"constantly on the cusp of trying to kiss you,"* if it was serious or not? His cheeks were the same flushed pink as the infamous Cupid's Elixir. It was freaking Valentine's Day and he'd just gotten dumped. Well, admittedly by the guy who Jisung had told him he was too good for, but- *wait.*

"I don't know if you feel the same as I do."

Hyunjin's gaze was an anchor through the tumult of crowing drunken sailors and hazy crimson phantasms, reaching out with an answer to the question he'd been asking before. *"But we could be together if you wanted to."*

Could they really?

"Do I wanna know, if this feeling flows both ways,"

"Sad to see you go," hummed Jisung, watching Hyunjin move backwards up the aisle. *"Was sorta hoping that you'd stay."*

"You alright there, Sungie?" asked Felix. He looked like he might burst out laughing.

Jisung spared a glance at the bar crowd outside of their booth; everyone in the building was cheering on their feet, leaning whole bodies over tables, waving drinks in the air, eyes glassy and mesmerized. *If they're riled, I must really look like something else.* "I don't know." If the night really was made for saying things you

couldn't say tomorrow day, who knew what he was going to hear? "I don't know."

"Crawling back to you," sang Hyunjin and his devotees. "Ever thought of calling when you've had a few? Cause I always do."

"Maybe I'm too busy being yours to fall for somebody new. Now I've thought it through."

Crawling back to you, thought Jisung.

Did he really want to do this again? Psyche himself up over another enticing moment to the brimming point of a confession until Hyunjin found someone else to fix his attention to- to know if these feelings flowed both ways? *Didn't I just convince myself I was fine with him not wanting me?* They had been on the verge of this for so long, it felt; a tale that wouldn't stop telling, wouldn't let the ink dry. Every day, the boy by the pond became more and more magical. *What do I want him to be to me?*

"Do I wanna know? Too busy being yours to fall-"

"Sad to see you go, ever thought of callin', darling-"

"Do I wanna know? Do you want me crawling back to you?"

The drumbeat aligned itself to the boom of his heart- rippling with an overcurrent of electric guitar, the tilt of Hyunjin's hips as he sauntered upstage, found the mic stand and pivoted on his heel to face forward. The flash and hue of red lights faded over his movements: a glimpse of a step, a skim of the crowd, a microphone set back in place. Soon enough, as the song came to an end, Jisung watched the rest of Hyunjin get swallowed up by black.

Cupid's Unbirthday stumbled into the witching hour with a surge of poured liquor and rasped ballads into a sweaty microphone, midnight blanketing the party in a veil of monstrous misrule and excusable

impulsivity. Even with three consecutive Cupid's Elixirs in his system, Hyunjin wasn't the only person letting the atmosphere trick him into doing something stupid.

While an *ahuizotl* who looked like a root vegetable entertained the crowd, Hyunjin used the distraction to slip out the side where Jisung had gone just minutes before. In the alley, pattering downpour took place of the music, fresh rainwater clearing away the sharp scent of booze. Instead of a surrounding throng of bodies lit up in changing globe lights, there was only one sitting sprawled against the brick under the awning, drawn in darkness.

Always brooding. Hyunjin wanted to push him into the rain.

He clicked the door shut behind him, and the sound caught Jisung's attention. When his head turned, the spotlight of the moon flickered over him, and his face softened in the shadows.

"What're you doing out here?" asked Hyunjin.

"Enjoying the quiet." Maybe the response was pointed. Hyunjin possibly didn't care. "What about you?"

"Looking for you." Jisung scoffed, looked back at his shoes. "Did you think I wouldn't, after you left this party by itself?"

"Well it didn't stop for me, did it?"

"It's Cupid's Un-freaking-birthday. The best party of the year!"

"That's what you say about every party in this town."

"'Cause it's *true*." Hyunjin inclined his head to get a better read on the spriggy's expression. "And last I saw, you were having a good time."

Something like the reason flashed over Jisung's face- somber and familiar and fleeting before it could be parsed. "I just needed to get out," he said, soft, a little gruff. "Just for a little bit."

The challenge was there again, in front of his face, and Hyunjin didn't pass it up. He dropped down in the empty spot next to him, knees tucked into his chest, completely innocent. Jisung eyed him, not fooled for a second. "Doesn't the siren have some swooning crowds to beguile?"

Hyunjin waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, I've done enough beguiling for one night." It dropped, and he let it settle beside Jisung's, just close enough to feel the heat of potential. "I got your attention- that was all I really wanted."

Jisung's eyes flicked down at their hands- he looked more afraid than curious. "What about Daewhi? You heard from him since he walked out?"

"Nope. A little too pissed for that. Not that I blame him." The back of Hyunjin's head bumped against the wall. "I was gonna break up with him anyway."

"Seriously?"

"Yup. Wasn't anything he did. I just... wasn't into him like I was supposed to be." He touched the toe of his boot to Jisung's. "What can I say? You were right."

Now Jisung was looking at their feet. With every touch, he seemed more and more on edge. "Why did he leave?"

Guess I know who you really want now. "He saw what I hadn't been able to tell him. Put the pieces together for himself." Hyunjin had seen enough of Minho whispering in his ear through his own performance; maybe he'd given Jisung his own idea of what kind of pieces. He drifted his hand closer, a little zip of warmth that connected them as skin brushed skin, turned up the wattage in his smile. "I wasn't the only one with a memorable performance," he mused. "There was you too."

Any suspicion Jisung had was disguised by bashful laughter.
"Please."

It was endearing. Wow, Hyunjin was drunk. "Come on, you were great. You should sing more often, it's a whole other side of you."

"I like this side of me just fine. It thinks right."

"Ever wonder if it thinks too much? We got two sides to us- one that thinks, one that doesn't." He curled his fingers around Jisung's, pulled them clumsily under his palm. "The other side's your gut feeling taking over. It's more... uninhibited. Open. Honest."

Jisung was looking fully at their hands now; his fingers had begun to coil up in Hyunjin's grasp. "What're you doing?" The question could have referred to anything.

Hyunjin, logic numbed and senses having left the building of his brain, answered him easily. "Moving closer every time you say something stupid," he replied. "Keep it up- we're really getting somewhere."

"Not my fault you didn't tell me the rules."

"Would it have changed much?" A muscle ticked in his jaw, a smile he knew looked cocky and inviting. "Onstage. You seemed to have something to ask me."

Jisung swallowed. Hyunjin wanted to follow the sound down his throat. "Don't think that was it."

"I think you did." Hyunjin watched him inhale through his nose with hazy tunnel vision as he inched closer. "And I answered you."

"With the first song Jeongin put in his rivals to lovers playlist."

"Are you saying it's a bad one?" By the entrance to LCM, a couple pushed open the door, giving Hyunjin an earful of the next Arctic

Monkeys he'd heard that night. "Or would you have preferred something different?"

Jisung bit his lip, stilled when Hyunjin leaned in. *"I wanna be your vacuum cleaner, breathing in your dust,"**

"I wanna be your Fort Cartina, I won't ever rust,"

He hummed through the first verse, nonchalantly brought Jisung's hand closer, watched his own hand trail up the black denim covered arm to find his shoulder. *If you like your coffee hot, let me be your coffee pot.*

"You're drunk," Jisung muttered, fixing his eyes on the rain-soaked rubble in the street, not pushing him away. "You don't mean what you're saying."

"I'm not drunk." The tips of Hyunjin's thumb and forefinger found a Nirvana patch. "I'm just repeating what I said."

In the dark, Jisung's face was a blur of shadows. "You remember what I was asking before?"

"Now that you admit it, yes."

Hyunjin found the seam at his shoulder, and Jisung finally looked him in the eye. "Then you'd know that you wouldn't have to sing to get me to look at you."

He moved, turning his body towards Hyunjin, heaving him off balance. Jisung's hand rose immediately across to his shoulder, steadying him.

"If I were to say it to you plainly, it wouldn't be about your voice," Jisung told him, not an ounce of humor betraying his earnest tone. "It never was- not your looks, your past, or your power. None of that would ever matter." He tucked the loose strands of hair behind

Hyunjin's ear- tenderly, a way they never were to each other. "All I'd want is you."

The door to Love Cherry Motion swung open, and Hyunjin's ears, heart and mind flooded with, *"I wanna be yours, I wanna be yours..."*

And suddenly, with Hyunjin's own hand resting over Jisung's heart, it was all crashing into him- all of tonight and yesterday and every other day he'd spent trying to kick his feelings to the curb, shove them away somewhere they couldn't do any damage bursting out to fill the matrix of the air. It filled every room in Levanter and every shop in Eldritch and bloomed in Jisung's earnest, ground-steady eyes the color of a world that wouldn't dream of hurting him, a world he never thought he'd be able to live in again. It couldn't be real, not after everything he'd put him through. Just the view of it, even from afar, it was too much. It looked too beautiful, too kind, too big to hold just him.

The music was too loud; the rain in comparison was deafening. If his heart beat any harder, any faster, it would break through the bone. Jisung's hand was warm, too warm, as it ghosted over his cheek. "Are you okay?"

Hyunjin couldn't take this. He didn't *deserve* this, after treating it all like some game. If he lived this moment any longer, he was only going to find a way to make it worse.

"Sorry," he heard himself murmur, pulling out of his reach, dropping his eyes to the floor so as not to see the confusion clouding the spriggan's sweet face. "Sorry, I..."

He didn't have to finish his sentence. He turned and ran back into the bar, wrapping his arms around himself, trying to block out how much warmer he'd been with Jisung.

Though Jisung would walk in after him, lock their eyes across the room, the moment froze over, stayed there in that damp midnight

alleyway. There was no bridge built across the gap, no move to clear the fog, no one who reached out to the other to tell him that it was more than a Valentine's Day mishap to both of them.

When they did speak of it again, it was three days later after one strained phone call from Daewhi, the spriggan crossing the fifteen-foot wide distance entrenched with barbed wire and lava, made up of an entire courtyard of space between rooms. Hyunjin three mugs of coffee in thought, perched precariously on the edge of his seat at the dining table, Jisung with his gaze stuck to the ground, speed-growing a blue violet* with his mind.

To his credit, Hyunjin did try to speak first. "Do you want to try again?"

"Do you want to just forget this ever happened?" Jisung blurted at the same time, trumping his request.

It was a solid case: they were both drunk, perpetually single, therefore mixed up because of that. The way their house was, it wasn't like they could ghost each other forever for it. If they really thought about it, nothing major had really happened.

Then, damningly, he looked at Hyunjin. "That's what you wanted too, right?"

And just like that, it seemed, as quick as the possibility had arisen, it was over. Just three days to sweep it under the rug, reverting to the normal they'd grown so used to, where nothing meant anything, where they were just friends who fought over after-dinner UNO sometimes, where they could spend the next few weeks cleaning their minds of the moment in the alley of Love Cherry Motion, of guilty pleasure songs and a curtain of rain over Jisung's gentle words and Hyunjin's soft eyes and convince themselves that the rest of the night meant just as much.

Maybe, Hyunjin considered, if he'd stayed, choked down his fear and found something to say in response, he could have been looking at

another present. But maybe it was right to have happened this way. If Jisung had loved him any, then that had been crushed like a fly with a mallet and buried in the ground with a daffodil* headstone. *He's too good for someone who runs- he doesn't deserve to be the chaser.*

At the same time, Jisung wondered that maybe, if things were different, if they'd met differently, under a circumstance where it didn't lead to hate, then maybe it could have worked. They could have fallen into the kind of love that didn't need to force itself into every stolen nook and corner, the kind that didn't need to announce itself, something that settled into the sheets and stretched out its legs just as easy as anything that had ever made its home in the rooms of Levanter.

Maybe they'd both get past this, one day, find people who were right for them and all their elemental chaos.

But for that moment, right there and then, Hyunjin answered, "Yeah."

Present

Jeongin, who'd been restlessly tapping his foot in the watchtower for ten minutes, shattered his patience. "I can't do this." Grabbing the megaphone, he yelled out the window, *"Denial is a river in Egypt, Irene, his answer is no!"*

Sunset had fallen over The Fortunate Isles, but for the first time, no one was even looking at it. There wasn't much they could enjoy, what with Irene and company still taking up residence in the forest, annoying the hell out of the wildlife and both covens.

"Xiaojun and Hendery haven't left Mark alone for one *second*," Jackson complained. "All day, they've just been talking up their Wild Hunt and all the shit it does. Who cares if they took a group trip to Galicia? It was just to diversify their own shit. He *has* a coven, and it's *here*."

"Tell me about it," groused Felix. "That dryad girl just *won't* leave Changbin alone. Why? He's a demon, he can't join their nature shit. Obviously, he works out, but she doesn't have to ask about it every five seconds."

"Plus, none of us go a mile without getting asked information on *you*," said Chan, pointedly aiming his glare at Jisung, who'd been pacing the courtyard with all the rest of them. "It's more than a little tiring."

Jaebum jabbed the spriggan with his elbow. "Jury's in, kid. You have to get her out."

"I *know* that," Jisung groaned. He hadn't dared to leave the palace- if he did, who knew what the Wild Hunt would attempt? "But what can I tell her that I haven't already told her a million times before? My answer hasn't changed since 1963."

"Maybe it'll mean more in person," offered Seungmin from Mark's guest-greeting pine. "Talking to you close up always does add a certain personal touch that can't be found in a letter."

"It's Irene- she's not gonna care about that. I've gotta say something that shuts her up for good- even though I haven't managed that in over sixty years."

"Well, you do have a brain floating around in that compact little cranium." Minho came up from behind a pillar with a cup of tea, gave it a couple knocks himself. "Maybe you'll find that six-plus decades of concentrated hatred and suppressed anger'll give you some rocket fuel. For the good of your coven and your ill-treated mental wellbeing, use it." He gave him a shove for the door. "You'll thank you later."

Jisung rubbed his head, shaking it. "Pretty sure I won't."

"Use it!"

He stumbled out the gate, and it slammed behind him, officially booting Jisung out of the house. Once thirty solid seconds passed without him getting mugged, he took it as his green light to move.

How many more ways could he find to tell Irene no? Should he say it in Spanish (he'd been learning)? In a sonnet (second time could be the charm)? Through Megan Trainor (Youngjae had already offered to be backup)? Would it even make a difference? She'd been sending partially veiled threats on papyrus since Death Note first aired; maybe she'd finally wanted to make good on them. Using an entire forest path to drag him and his coven six feet under as a welcoming committee had sent that kind of impression.

But that kind of witty repartee had only been exercised over letters for so long. Jisung couldn't deny that seeing her in person- a part of his past which he'd been fine with leaving in Bellingham -had shaken him up. The sight of her smile still ran the same unsettling chills down his spine, with her persistent casualness and foreboding remarks that made him feel like he was skipping on down to his own funeral. Knowing that she'd accomplished her expansion of the Wild Hunt didn't ease the pain- as well as the knowledge that she was definitely going to rub it in his face too.

It's just a talk, he soothed himself. Just get her to leave them alone, get off the island, and perhaps also out of your life. No way he could fuck that up.

The winds of the beach below sang in his ears, along with the voice it carried.

*"... standing in a nice dress, staring at the sunset, babe..."**

All Jisung needed to see was the flash of red by the shoreline to smile. *If he's gonna sing Taylor Swift in front of a sunset, he's gotta expect someone to make fun of him for it.*

He changed course from the forest to the beach, letting the tether of Hyunjin's voice guide him down the steps. The closer he got, the

clearer he could hear, *"In your wildest dreams, oh-oh,"*

The waning sunlight washed over the rocks, bathing the pale sand in burnished golden. With every step down, Jisung caught a glimpse: he was just sitting there, hair down, legs sprawled out, jeans rolled up to the knee, just letting the crashing waves make up for the space between verses.

"He said, 'No one has to know what we do,' his hands are in my hair, his clothes are in my room,"

Jisung considered joining him, as he had so many times in the past, introducing himself that way. He'd only been brave enough once, when he thought he might never get the chance again. Now he relinquished the safety of listening, staying a safe distance away, where he couldn't do any potential harm.

A bit long to keep playing it safe, Irene snarked in his mind, once again giving shape to his doubts.

For him, thought Jisung as he reached the ground of the shore, peeking from behind the boulder that hid him from view, *it's worth it every time.*

"Say you'll remember me," sang Hyunjin, that dork, who just wanted a backdrop to match the scenario. *"Standing in a nice dress, staring at the sunset, babe,"*

"Red lips and rosy cheeks, say you'll see me again even if it's just in your wildest dreams, oh-oh,"

Somehow, he was the wildest one Jisung had ever had. Stepping out from the cover of the boulder, he interrupted with, "Nice to see you exploring genre variety."

Hyunjin jumped like he'd been sitting on dynamite. *"Fucking-"* He felt around and threw the nearest shell he could find. "Goddamn you!"

Jisung cackled, scooping up the hermit crab where he'd been lying in the sand. "Just applauding your efforts. You took out a sunset song for a sunset scene. Honestly, respect."

"Fuck off." Hyunjin enunciated by flipping him off over his shoulder. "Go back to hiding from Irene in the palace."

"I'm not *hiding* from her!"

"Yeah you are."

"No, I'm *not*."

The siren turned around for the sole reason of raising his eyebrow. "Did they invade the courtyard?"

"No, asshole, they didn't." Jisung stomped through the sand and sat defiantly down next to him. "I just thought I'd hide from her at the beach."

The eyebrow stayed raised- either he was impressed or seeing right through his shit. "Wise choice," Hyunjin relented, smirking out at the waves. "This is the one place Irene and her lackeys won't go near."

"Why?" The shore crept up on their feet, fluid, playful, dynamically blue. "Ohhh, right. Elemental business. Almost forget about those kinds of differences."

"And you wonder why we wouldn't last," Hyunjin joked. Jisung tried to smile, but it showed up faint as it felt. The smiles drooped on both their faces. "Got a whole island pissed at you, y'know."

"Usually it's just half an island." Hyunjin chuckled. "Are you pissed at me?"

"No." He pulled his knees up to his chest. "I just wonder if our demons will ever leave us alone."

Got me, Jisung thought. “Changbin hasn’t been that much of a dick to you, has he?”

Hyunjin kicked him sourly into the sand. “You know what I *mean*.”

Jisung laughed, looking up in time to see Hyunjin shake his head, smile returning to tug on his lips. “Jesus. What the hell does Irene want with you?”

“I’m the heart of the party,” Jisung replied, gesturing to himself as he propped up his torso with his elbows. “The full package, baby. Can’t pass that up.”

“How do you plan on making her?”

A duo of seagulls squawked overhead, chasing each other away from the horizon. “Ain’t that the question of the year.”

Hyunjin cut a glance down to him. From this angle, Jisung noticed the sea spray in his hair. “You don’t know?”

“I mean, obviously I’m gonna turn her down. It’s just the *how* that’s the question. I’ve done it every way I could imagine.”

“Didn’t you send her that sonnet-?”

“With forty six stanzas. Classic.”

“Oh, and in 2010-“

“The whole audio clip of Michael reacting to therapy with Toby. Still can’t remember how I attached that to a letter.”

Hyunjin rolled his eyes. “Maybe something from the heart?”

“Yeah, we’re not really on an emotional level, if you know what I mean?”

“Well, you stopped writing back to her years ago. What comes up every time Minho hands you another one? What do you wish you could tell her?”

Jisung hummed. “Pretty much ‘fuck off’ in every known language.” Sand flew in his face. “Hey, you wanted honest!”

“‘Honest’ didn’t stop Irene from following you off the coast of Louisiana.” Hyunjin was looking at him in full now, but not with the kind of annoyance a few jokes could laugh away. “Imagine what you would’ve told her if you knew just one more letter would’ve shut her up. What do you want?”

There was too much he wanted. To turn his back on Irene and feel her disappear. To enjoy the rest of his road trip in peace. *To pull you down here with me.* But, concentrated on one want, he could honestly say: “I want her to let me live in the home I chose.”

This time, Hyunjin let the quiet settle. The breeze blew strands of scarlet in front of Pacific blue eyes, which could never stay one shade. *Fire and ice.* “Levanter?”

“No, the Magic School Bus.” Hyunjin kicked his heel with a smile. “There’s nowhere else it could really be.”

“Even if there are nicer places to be.” The look on his face felt like seafoam- something delicate, lovely, so underrated someone else might miss it. “Ever wonder if it really was an accident that we all found our ways there?”

“Not sure if there’s *that* much magic to a pile of bricks.”

“Come on, think about it! Not all of us just had to step the border from Washington- we all came from different places. Jeongin came from fucking Minnesota, where they get actual real snow. I was lucky enough to get washed up somewhere Chan could stroll up and find me. It’s gotta have some kind of explanation!”

"Y'know, I always forget you're all about that romantic fate and destiny until you get on about this stuff. It's adorable."

"You're-" Jisung raised his own eyebrows over an expectant smile. "Shove it."

"What'd I say?"

"Nothing, just." Hyunjin pinned his seafoam smile to the horizon. "It can't be all bullshit."

"And it isn't." Jisung could go on in all the ways. "Anyone who lived the journey would know." *Unluckily for anyone, it's just us.* "What do you think makes it so special?"

"For a pile of bricks?" Jisung smirked, flicked a shell at him. "The simple things- little things. Plain walls- you can put anything over those. Clean windows- even the driest of places looks better with a pretty view. And all in the safest little dream of a town you can imagine."

"Sounds like a real paradise, when you put it like that." Jisung contemplated it, put the answer into his own words. "A place where you can bring your definition of home with you."

"There you go." As the surf rushed up again, the tension in Hyunjin's back unlocked. "Is that why you planted your garden?"

That garden. The place that had saved his life and put it back on balance. Even with all that was going on, he trusted Yerin was tending to it well. "At first, yeah- to gain back some of the power I'd lost. But then it started growing, taking root in a place I hadn't really expected to love. Started the hospice a few months after."

"No shit- that's why you sleep in there sometimes?"

"Why listen to animal sounds on your phone when you can get the experience for free?"

"And somehow I'm the dork."

"Fuck off," Jisung sniped. "What about all the beach scapes you draw?"

"Because I can't exactly walk down to one in Oregon." The hermit crab skittered up to him, snapping at his fingertips. Instead of throwing it again, Hyunjin laughed. "And... the record store always has a good 70's stock."

"Ah, yes. Music, the soul of nostalgia." A lightbulb flickered; something about it gave Jisung the energy to sit up in full, peek hesitantly at the profile next to his. "You went there a lot after you decided to stay at Levanter."

Hyunjin shrugged. "Music was always a big thing for my family. It was how we stayed connected to the world, why we always came back to it. Every time my brother came back to the island, it was like it always had a different sound." The glow in his eyes hid behind a cloud, dimming with the light of day. "Maybe I'd have stayed forever, if neither of my siblings had left. The place on its own never changed- rain or shine, it was always beautiful. The house, the tree I'd climb to draw in, the bonfire where Jinyoung would play his guitar, the neighborhood at night... God, I'll never forget the summer of '59." He grinned at the memory. "Jinyoung had brought back a hibiscus plant from one of his first trips. We planted it by the shore, and after three months, it bloomed- bright yellow, red in the heart. I was the first one to see it- I dragged my brother and sister out to see it too." He dropped his head softly in the crook of his elbow, pensive. "I thought it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen, and I had no real idea what it was. I thought, 'If something this beautiful exists out there, maybe there's more worth knowing.'"

Funny, Jisung mused, reaching up towards the shell of his ear, where the hair had come loose in front of it. *That's what I thought when I met you.*

Good Lord, he had to get the nerve sometime, at least to do this.

Jisung reached up towards the shell of his ear, where the hair had come loose in front of it. Letting action take over, he tucked it away with the pad of his thumb, the flower blooming in its place.

The siren jumped for the second time, scaring the poor hermit crab into escape. "What was..." he trailed off as his fingers grazed the petals.

"To remind you of home," Jisung said simply.

The shock faded out like a tempest after a storm, blurred on his face and blended into something pastel-soft, warm as a sunset and just as bright. "Thank you."

Whenever he looked at him like that, Jisung couldn't do anything but smile. "Anytime."

And Hyunjin did that thing he did: he smiled back. Away from the horizon and just kept looking, on an island full of treachery and wonder like he was the only thing worth looking at.

And apparently his nerve ended there, because it got Jisung to his feet before he could see Hyunjin's face. "Welp, thanks for the pep talk. Gonna go..." Thumb over the shoulder. "Tell Irene to fuck off now. Thanks. Bye."

Hands on his pockets, the wind that had lured him in chased him out to the tune of *no game, no game, you have no game*.

Hyunjin watched as he crossed up the steps, right where he'd left him. Taking the flower out from behind his ear, he cupped it in his hands, held it up to the sunlight.

The hibiscus never blooms long, Jinyoung whispered in his ear on the island, past echoing in the present. But, if given the right love and nurture, it'll keep coming back, year after year, more beautiful than ever.

All at once, Hyunjin couldn't have stopped smiling if he tried. He let breeze blow him laughing on his back as the tide came rushing back to the shore, powerless to stop it. The hibiscus, splayed out in his palm, smiled back at him.

Nature boy, he thought, a replay of the name he'd made up to tease. "Nature boy." Now, the guitar strummed freely, a simple few notes making up a melody, filling up the stage of his mind.

*"There was a boy,"**

Jisung reached the top of the island without a backwards look over his shoulder, took a deep breath.

"A very strange, enchanted boy,"

Filling his mind with the words from the shoreline, he headed a course through the forest.

"They say he wandered very far, very far, over land and sea,"

The animals poked out of their hiding places when he entered, out of nests and burrows and hollow logs hidden by flowers. Jisung welcomed the finch that flew from its branch to meet him; then he could trust. "You know where I could find Irene?"

"A little shy, and sad of eye,"

The finch chirped, and he looked ahead, at the clearing he and Mark had visited just days ago, this time circled by weeping willows that hadn't been there before; dryads in disguise, shimmering with a crystalline field.

"But very wise was he,"

When he arrived, pushed back their branches and stepped into the ring of fire, Irene was waiting, back to the entrance, watching the clouds streak the sky. She turned to him as if greeting an expected guest. "You're just in time for the beginning of blue hour."

"I didn't come to chat."

Her brow arched coolly. Hands in front of her chest, hair rippling down her back; she was a portrait of Poison Ivy, had she ever wished to be a queen. "So be it."

"And then one day,"

They didn't step in, but around each other, like caged lions over an arena. "You already know why I'm here," growled Jisung. "My answer's not going to change."

"Shame," purred Irene. "After all these years of dried-up rapport, I'd have hoped you came up with some fresh material for me."

"Leave this island. You have no business with anyone here."

"It was nice to see Mark again. Sure cleaned up since the 70's."

"He told me he hasn't seen you in years!"

"That was before he housed one of the only beings on the planet capable of matching my power."

Jisung stopped in a half circle. "Is that what this has been about this whole time?"

"I didn't come all this way for a replay of history." Irene slowed to the space before him. "Haven't you learned way of the game by now?"

"I try to stay out of it."

"A fool's method. Everyone gets lured one way or another."

"And that's what you've come to do?"

"No." Her smile curved inwards, stance poised to make the first move. "Just to lay out a few observations."

"One magic day, he passed my way,"

Irene's hands shot out, and an orchestra of poison ivy vines missed out of the ground. Jisung's hands rose instinctively to defend as they swept towards the ground, but Irene changed their direction to a hard left, running the stalks through the pond beyond the boulders. They returned to the area in front of her and, as she splayed out her fingers, *unraveled*: the stems of the vines became silk-thin, chloroplast-green strands made iridescent by the water drops that clung to them. Weaving them together, they became an enlarged form of the letter she'd send him every year- a tapestry.

"From a forest to a garden," she began, illustrating the scene by manipulating the strands with the tips of her fingers, weaving paper birches that faded to globe gillias and Western sword ferns and Pacific bleeding hearts. "You've learned to contend with the former glory you used to enjoy and shape it into something smaller, more manageable, easier to trust as your life source. Small, but pitiful. And to say nothing of that filthy little *hospice*." The scene changed to chattering squirrels, noisy robins, sneaky bobcats. "To convince yourself you're still of use to the environment, you take sick little creatures into that little apartment room, force them to not only fraternize while they recover but listen to the noise you call *music taste* while they're at it. It's beyond pathetic- it's *torture*."

Jisung didn't even have it in him to be offended that she'd insulted his music taste. "How did you know all that?"

"I have some very informative wrens." She strummed her fingers over the strands for the next slide. "And of course, we can't forget about the found family who took you in along the way." The next few images could have been photos taken midmoment in the Levanter household: Minho versus Jeongin on the sparring field, Seungmin screaming at a smug Changbin over Cranium, Felix teaching Chan his brownie recipe in the kitchen. *Did she somehow get ahold of my memories? Was he ever going to trust a weeping willow again?* "Whatever dignity you had before was lost when you opened your heart to them. They roped you into the simpleton paradise of

suburbia and you, after a lifetime of swearing that you wouldn't, *let* them." She laughed. "Looks like someone still hasn't quite gotten back on their feet after getting a taste of the Columbia River."

The moments kept scrolling on; the boys crying over the proposal scene in Schitt's Creek, cheering as Chan and Jeongin covered Happy New Year* at Love Cherry Motion's New Years party, fighting over ways to split the bill. These were the most important people he'd ever met, the ones who'd saved him. He would never feel ashamed of them.

"After what *you* did to me," Jisung fired back. "Where was your savior bullshit after that, huh? They were the ones who gave me a new home. *They* were the ones who brought me back from nothing. I owe my life to them, not you!"

Irene hummed, strumming her harp. "I suppose I'll have to give them that," she amended. "But, then again, it's not family we stay for, is it? You thought of Minhyuk as your family, and he left you too." His fists clenched, and the ground rumbled. Irene giggled. "No, it's the connection we feel to them, the hook we throw out and hold onto until it catches onto someone we could follow forever. Had your hook latched to someone outside of the coven, you would've already left, wouldn't you? But you haven't." Her eyes flashed with mischief. "Because there's also him."

Before he could step back to distance himself, the tapestry took the form of Hyunjin, standing in the lake at Utah, water swirling around him like a deity. "Your Daphne who you chase about the woods. You love him so dearly, but he never pays you any mind. A true Greek tragedy." Irene stepped around, and the water shifted. "I mean, I get what you see. He's everything you value in this life." Hyunjin in the car, belting out to Legally Blonde with Felix. "Energy." Hyunjin in a circle of water, brawling to the tune of Toxic. "Strength." Hyunjin in his arms, spinning out of a dance in a smoky roadside bar, smiling as Jisung pulled him back in. "Beauty."

I didn't even know I had that memory. Jisung cast his gaze aside, flushed away from it.

"Still, energy dwindles, strength is sapped away, and beauty- well, that could be erased at the flip of a coin. It's temporary, as so many things are," Irene went on blithely, shattering the illusion. "It's the same with all the other elements- fire, though it burns brightly, always goes out. Water, though it rages, dries up. Even the air, in all its infinite power, will sour and leave the mortals to choke on it. In the end, no matter how dry or cracked, in green or grey, solid in root or dirt or debris, earth will last forever!" The tapestry reformed into vines, leaving Irene and the mad glitter in her eyes, a despot whose own dogma was their law. "While they will crumble beneath it, we will last forever. As long as there is power to be reaped from the soil, we will live long past anything on this island, in this world. You could have a claim over all of it. With my help, you could learn to harness it all, to be tied down to nothing. To be *immortal*." In a breathless lull, she laughed manically. "Tell me, that in a world with so much pain and so many endings, that doesn't sound the least bit tempting."

"And while we spoke of many things, fools and kings, this he said to me:"

"It does," Jisung confessed quietly. "But it wouldn't be living."

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn,"

"After all this time, I finally think I understand the difference between you and me," Jisung told her, not in defense or response but his side of the story. "Someone must've told you that to succeed at life, you had to make it to top, wherever that was. Nothing wrong with that, it's the goal a lot of people have, except they don't care who they take down with them. They'll spend weeks on end putting themselves through hell, when the whole meaning of life is to experience what you can do with the time it's given you, how you can find goodness and love and happiness and feel that as much as possible. Sure, you've got to feel the scrapes and bruises along the way, but what would life be without those? To make a family, you don't need a

thousand followers from around the world. You just need a few trustworthy bastards who'll make even immortal life interesting because, let's be honest, shit gets boring sometimes. The rate you're going at, you'll get to that pedestal more soon than late, but you'll have no one to share the glory with. Like- Xiaojun and Hendery, I know they'll be around, but jeez, they've been complaining about their treatment since '63. If I'm gonna spend the rest of eternity with people like that, I think I'll take my chances with the found family."

"I wouldn't care if you took over the world; I'd dig to the mantle of the earth to get away from you. But that's not the point." Jisung matched her even stare, the knight squaring up to the queen on the board. "You're wrong about the world. About them, about him, about all of it. The life we were born to protect died a long time ago- we may never get that back. But it's more than a few golden years, moments to appreciate while we live them- it wouldn't be so long if it wasn't. All I've ever wanted is a stable ground under my feet, something to hold onto, and I've got that. You might not be ready to settle, but I am." For what might've been the first genuine time, he smiled at her. "I'm happy with the life I have, and nothing you can say will make me leave it."

Across the clearing, they stood, faced at an impasse that finally had some semblance of a bridge.

"Is just to love,"

"Well," Irene started heavily, her voice like an avalanche. "It seems I can't change your mind on the matter."

"And be loved in return,"

Jisung's initial reaction: suspicion. "That's it? Seriously- no counter-argument, counter punch, no nothing?"

"You've made your case, I've made mine. You found your peace, I'm searching. No matter- I've still got a country to acquire," Irene replied, crossing to her subject with steps lighter than air. "As far as I

can take from what you said, you're happy." She smiled commiseratively, the one glimpse of empathy he'd ever witnessed out of her. "What kind of monster would I be to take that away?"

Stiffly, Jisung mirrored the expression, even as she drew closer, cupped a hand around the nape of his neck and touched their foreheads together.

"I'll free you now, brother," Irene whispered. "May you treasure your peace, and walk safely among the green."

Jisung wrinkled his brow. "Was that from the Bible?"

"What? Fuck no, me."

She released him, and on the shore the siren lay, singing his song to a hibiscus, praying that his spriggan was safe.

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn,"

Jisung swept aside the weeping willow branches as he left the way he'd came, with the promise that Irene and her troops would be gone by nightfall, a time that neared closer and closer as curtains of indigo drew over the diminishing blue hour.

"Is just to love,"

The prickle on his nape rose, and he slapped it on instinct.

It's just a bug, Jisung told himself. Nothing amiss about that.

"And be loved in return."

Fire for You - Cannons

*I Knew You Were Trouble - Taylor Swift

*The Girl From Ipanema - Astrud Gilberto

*Shallow - Lady Gaga, Bradley Cooper

*Heartbreak Hotel - All Shook Up Ensemble (lo siento the theater kid in me took over)

*Cake By The Ocean - DNCE

*Make Me Feel - Janelle Monae

*How Long - Charlie Puth

*Do I Wanna Know? - The Arctic Monkeys

* I Wanna Be Yours - The Arctic Monkeys

*Wildest Dreams - Taylor Swift

*Nature Boy - Sahr Ngaujah, Aaron Tveit, Original Broadway Cast of Moulin Rouge!

*Happy New Year - ABBA

*Blue violet: Watchfulness, faithfulness, I'll always be yours.

*Daffodil: Rejection, unrequited love.

*Yellow hibiscus: Happiness, sunshine, pure love.

0X1=LOVESONG

Chapter 24: 0X1=LOVESONG

Ah, yes, my favorite thing to write. Just when all seems well and good PAIN.

The gang's picking back up after Irene's gone; Hyunjin, for the first time in a while, is reconsidering his chances with a certain spriggan, which would be wonderful if it weren't for the nerves that won't seem to leave him alone.

TW: vomiting and anxiety attacks ahead

love sick,

,

I'm a loser in this game...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

For the first time since he'd crossed the Gulf of Mexico, Jisung had peace.

Irene had packed up her company and bade her farewells off the island the night before, giving Jeongin the go-ahead to blast AJR in the watchtower the minute the Wild Hunt was out. As far as he knew, she was out of his present, future, and afterlife, simply due to the right words said. Just like that.

So if he were on edge about anything, that'd just be crazy.

But he woke up there the next morning- sunshine stabbing through his eyes, cold sweat from a dreamless sleep, a rush of too much sound to his ears, like he'd just been dug up from underground. It took approximately sixty seconds more than usual to get used to it, shake his head back into working condition, push off the mattress and pad on down the stairs.

None of the others seemed to be experiencing the same trouble- it looked like they'd been awake for hours without him, just chatting away at the table.

"Okay, like," Minho waved his fork for silence. "I love humanity and all."

"Literally the first and only time you've ever said that," piped Seungmin.

"But the names of male deodorant got me crying in Bath & Body Works."

"Well, go on," prompted Jinyoung. "Share with the class, don't be shy."

"The level of douchebag differs from company to company," explained Minho. "Axe has some real charmers: Apollo, Phoenix, Anarchy and- my personal favorite- *Dark Temptation*."

Jeongin shuddered. "Lord in hell, you did the jazz hands with it."

"What we need to talk about Old Spice," Yugyeom jumped in. "We got Swagger, Krackengard, Wolfthorn. All the scents a growing boy needs."

"Seriously, who the hell decided they wanted to smell like *graphite*, of all things?" ranted Mark. "It makes no sense."

"It's a nice smell," Jackson mumbled defensively next to him.

"Babe, I love you, but you know I draw the line at sandalwood."

"Whatever their method is, it's working," said Felix. "I officially want to smell like dark temptation."

Sitting down with their laughter in his ears was a small comfort; Chan ruffled his hair in good morning, Changbin nodded up at for a second before ripping a turkey sausage in half with his teeth. Their company felt comforting, familiar. *They were my first friends in this coven- why wouldn't it be?*

It might've signaled a peaceful start to a peaceful day, if it weren't for the twinkly glances Hyunjin was sending him across the table. Jisung seemed to look up just in time to catch them, an electric spark across the space, and yet it shocked him every time.

"Looks like someone's got an admirer," Chan teased, in a manner only he thought was subtle.

"Did something happen between you guys that we missed?" asked Changbin. He'd now found something more interesting than his breakfast.

"No," Jisung lied, locking his eyes on his half-empty plate. "Nothing happened. It's nothing."

Either they knew something was up, or neither Chan nor Changbin was yet in the mood to press further, but they dropped it; Jisung could almost see the judgement they exchanged over his head, it felt like ducking under a sword. *If I talk, I'll see it more*, he bartered with himself. *But if I look up, I'll see him.*

And suddenly, that was the most terrifying prospect of all.

So he stayed quiet, listening in on the bustling conversation, keeping his eyes to himself for his own wavering sanity.

It had been like this in the beginning, when he first arrived at Levanter, he remembered: little things setting him off. Chirping starlings flying overhead. The smell of old pine, even from air

fresheners. Even the best of the Beatles for a while: anything that reminded him of what he used to know.

But it's different now, Jisung thought, watching the others run around the sprawling backyard. *I know where my home is.*

Yet, for the life of him, he couldn't make himself listen to a word Mark was saying on the upbringing of the plum blossoms pink azalea bushes twining around the Windows. All of his words blended with the squawk of the seagulls and crashing waves from miles below. No one else seemed to hear it- they were too busy enjoying the sunshine.

Like fools. A feeling like a bee sting crawled up his nape. Irene had just left; surely she had something else up her sleeve.

Jisung shook his head. They weren't *fools*- they were happy. There was nothing wrong with that, they deserved to be.

Far off in the center of the courtyard, Jinyoung had taken Hyunjin out for some sparring practice- "To see if you've actually learned how to handle yourself these past few decades."

Hyunjin had laughed in his face when he accepted. *Never a man to turn down a challenge.*

It was clear from the blows they struck at each other, harsh cacophonies of saltwater slicing at each other like swords, that they had both taken it to heart. Twin warriors cut from the same cloth- a symphony squaring up against the orchestra. Jinyoung, the older of the two, hit with more force, doubled back with quicker reaction time and treated the water as an extension of his body.

Hyunjin countered like he was the embodiment of the element, like he was water itself. Sharp dodges, erratic movements, attacking the shattering points at all ends. *He's been able to bring you down with even less. Worse, because you've let him.*

What was getting *into* Jisung? He hadn't thought like this in ages.
Perhaps I haven't let myself- maybe that's how dishonest I've been.

A clash of waves summoned from the ocean below brought a spray of sea salt crashing over everything in the yard- from every onlooker to every grain of sand. Even as they relented, the brothers were still laughing.

"Not half bad, Hyunjin," chuckled Jaebum. "Maybe we can steal you out of Stray Kids to join Got7 instead."

The forementioned members of Got7 laughed, as did the members of Stray Kids. And something in Jisung's stomach twisted.

Of course they'd laugh. He should laugh too. He looked weird enough not laughing- Mark was already giving him a look behind his back, Jisung could feel it, could see it, like he had eyes on the back of his head. Like he'd swallowed a bumblebee and his head was filled with the buzzing, buzzing, buzzing. Like every red ant on the island was tracking a course up his body, on his skin, under his clothes. Like God was holding a magnifying glass to reflect the sunlight onto the nape of his neck and laughing while it burned. *Let them laugh. Let him leave- hell, while he's at it, let him just wash this whole island back to the Holly Beach shore.*

"You alright, Jisung?" Mark's voice echoed faintly. He could barely hear him over the noise already in his head.

Jinyoung and Jaebum had thrown their arms around Hyunjin in their pride, two sides sandwiching one. All while Hyunjin smiled bashfully in the embrace, defenses dropped, the boy emerging from the waves. *Of course he smiles. He could imagine no better place for all his dreams than here.* Dreams, that Jisung had been reminded time and time again, didn't involve him. *Even though he's the only thing in mine.*

Ignoring Mark's question, Jisung broke off, crossed through the field; he brushed right past Hyunjin and didn't say a word, even as his

eyes followed after him in confusion.

He was making a scene and he knew it. Halfway through the field and he didn't care why. *Then why don't I feel bad?*

Maybe I don't have to- they're only staring because they don't expect it.

But-

"Jisung!"

Chan. Of course. That guy could never stop worrying. "Sung, you alright?"

He wanted to turn back, to at least answer, but the bees were buzzing louder, drowning out his thoughts. *It won't matter if you say 'Fine'- he won't believe you.* Jisung kept walking.

"Did Irene do something to your ears before she left?" Only Minho would've said something so bold.

"Did something happen with her?" Felix had the audacity to hold some genuine worry in his voice. "Is that what's wrong?"

"You haven't really told us anything since last night," Changbin added.

So all four of the horsemen are there- each with a different crisis in hand, but another way to help me. Under his breath, Jisung laughed. "She was here, I talked to her, she left. End of story."

"Yeah, you said one thing that made her switch around her whole lifelong hobby of tormenting you and pack her bags. That doesn't sound suspicious to you?" Minho's shout grated on his ears; it was only getting closer. "You of all people know that's not her."

"Don't you think we should be planning ahead to make sure she doesn't take us by surprise again?" prompted Changbin.

Do I have to uproot the ground beneath them to get them to shut up?
“Changes of heart happen all the time. People evolve.”

A scoff that his ears had grown to recognize as uniquely Minho's. “If we're talking about hearts referring to Irene, then we're better off reading Charles 11's autopsy report.” A light smack echoed. “What? It's true!”

“It's alright if you're scared,” said Chan. “You don't have be ready to retaliate. But you can talk to us if anything's wrong.”

“I'm fine.” *There it is, you dumbfuck- the opening they've been waiting for.*

“Pretty sure ‘fine’ wouldn't be storming out of the courtyard without saying jack to anyone,” Changbin countered. “Along with the fact that you haven't slowed down yet!”

“We're your coven, your family!” Felix called after him. “We'll listen to you.”

Well, isn't that a bucket of laughs. “Will you, now?”

“Jeez, did she jam a thorn up his ass or something?” muttered Minho.

“Keep it down!” Chan hissed, definitely thinking he couldn't hear. “Jisung, just come back down. Whatever's bothering you just say it!”

The buzzing roared louder. No. “No.”

Their footsteps halted, stung. “No?”

He wanted to turn around, willed himself to do so. He couldn't. “Leave me be.”

“What's the matter?” asked Changbin. “Did you not think we'd care?”

I'd only hoped as much. “If only you wouldn't.”

"Why wouldn't you want us to?" Felix's voice was hurt, bewildered. It should have made him feel sorry. But instead it irritated him. *Shouldn't he understand personal space most out of all of us? He ran away from God to get it.* They'd all gotten what they wanted—closure, freedom, opportunity. *All they want to do is flaunt it in my face.*

Jisung forced himself to stop before the forest, clench his shaking hands into fists. What was going on with him? He couldn't control his own thoughts, his own mind. *How do I tell them I don't mean it?* But then, in the next beat: *how do I get them the hell away?*

"It's alright," Chan's voice soothed, suddenly right next to his ear, so jarring Jisung's too loud heartbeat tumbled over itself. He hadn't even heard him over his own noise. "Just tell us if you want us to go or stay."

His hand landed on Jisung's shoulder. The buzzing raged. The cord snapped. A flash of blinding white through green—

Jisung whirled around with a root shooting out of the ground, cracking like a whip and startling him away.

"You wanna know what my problem is?" His voice was sharp as a skid on asphalt, a shock to his own ears. "My problem is you guys, chasing after me like a bunch of sorry fuckin' bloodhounds, saying you know how to solve my problems, when you don't know shit. What the hell should you even *care*? It's not like you've got anything holding you down anymore."

Minho had rushed forward to bring Chan to his feet, sweep him back. He was looking at Jisung like he didn't know who he was. "Jisung, what're you—"

"Like *you*!" Jisung whirled on him, pointing a finger. "You're the prime example of who should shut the fuck up. You pulled off your big mission, showed off your big power move, got Kai six feet under—least what can apply to it in a black hole. *Shut up about it.* He's gone."

It's over. You don't have to worry about him anymore, the trauma chest can be closed again."

"Watch it, Sung," Chan warned.

"A threat from you? That's rich. What'll you do, act on it? Hurt me?" Jisung splayed his arms out and open. Jaw clenched, the vampire didn't make a move. "You've always been too soft. It's why you never finish your battles- why you're always worried about everyone else but yourself. You're so desperate to think that they actually need you you'll throw yourself right into their first line of defense and call it a day's work. People only call it selfish so you won't see how pathetic it really is."

"Give it a rest, Sung," Changbin shouted. "We get it, we're inferior."

"What he *wanted* to say is that we're sorry for how you feel," Felix said over him. "But why're you taking it out like this?"

"H and all the Christs, don't even get me *started* on you two! One's an angel with minor to severe daddy issues, the other's a demon with PTSD from two shittily lived lives, and both get solace from each other on opposite sides of the elemental spectrum. Opposites *attract*. We *get it*. Just cut the bullshit, stop running blushy little circles around each other, and *tie the knot* already!" Changbin gawked, mouth opening and closing through unsaid comebacks. Felix, ears as red as poppies and too shook to laugh it off, maintained only the ability to stare. "You're the picture perfect pining in unison to the tune of Paul Anka cliché, and you don't even have to fake it. And maybe none of you thought you'd hear it from me, but with all the dumbassery flying around here every day, someone had to open their goddamn mouth."

And so, white noise ringing in his ear, audience too properly baffled to notice the blood trickling out of it, Jisung ran.

His legs couldn't carry him out of the field fast enough; if the others were following he couldn't let them catch up. But it was as though all

his senses were heightened, switched up to a thousand. The wind on his skin felt like stinging nettles; *were they branches?* The choking feeling squeezing his airway- *could it be a hand?* - made the blood pump harder through his heart. His head was filled with the sound of his own footsteps, his own madness swarming his ears. *Could the ground be crumbling right underneath me?*

Jisung dropped to his knees at an oak tree trunk and crumbled with it, grappling, scraping his fingers against the bark. His hands found the earth, and the sound forced itself out first- something grotesque, animal, something he barely even recognized himself -before he retched out the rest: bile and algae and whatever composure he'd managed to keep up in the palace. *What's happening to me?*

He tried to answer his own question but his mind had come unraveled; he tried breathe but the air came out in wheezes and shaky hiccups. The tingle in the back of his neck flared like a dagger plunged into his nape, diverting every nerve to the spot; scratching was like easing an itch- it did no good, but for the life of him, Jisung couldn't stop.

Clutching at the foot of a tree like a newborn cub with no hope of learning to climb, heart racing in the cage of his chest, eyes burning with what he couldn't even pretend weren't tears, Jisung found it was all he could do.

"So that was uncalled for," said Minho finally. It had taken him ten minutes walking from the field to the steps of the palace to form the sentence.

"Maybe not," Chan amended. "Some valid points were made."

"But could have been worded differently."

"And probably would have been, under normal circumstances."

"What do you think's the matter?"

"I don't know! I mean, up until this morning he seemed fine. A little more sensitive than usual-

"Sensitive how?" Scheming face had been acquired.

"Every time I'd talk to him, he'd just shut down or freeze up- like when I caught him in the middle of his memories back when he first got to Levanter. Something's put him back in his head, and it's never a good thing when he stays in there for too long."

Minho leaned back, thumb to his chin, the pensive scholar ruminating the possibilities of homicide. "Yup. Irene's definitely tried something different."

Chan leaned back with him. "What could she have done?"

"She's had her hooks in him from a distance for this long. Maybe she wanted to try an in-person approach to reel him in."

They split off for different targets: Chan for Mark in his gardening shed and Minho for Yugyeom on the second floor catwalk, both with different objections in mind.

"So." Chan started, "in the many years you've known Irene-

"Already don't like this," chimed Mark, fingers grazing his green tea camellia plant.

"Has she tried any foul play on you? I mean, like, what with the-

"Assault, attempted kidnapping, recent encroachment of property."

"Yeah." Chan paused. "Huh. Come to think of it, none of those were personal."

"And that interferes with the reason you came in here why?"

"Do you know of anything she could've possibly done to Jisung yesterday?"

“There’s the kicker.” Setting aside a creeping thyme pot, Mark turned to give Chan his full attention. “I was hoping you’d say something- that guy’s got a solid coven if they noticed something already.”

“Well, I know Jisung. And I know something’s gotta be off for him to use one of his roots on us.”

“Heightened temper,” Mark nodded, brooding. “Any other symptoms?”

“Uh... jumpier than usual, less willing to talk, kind of stuck in his head?”

He probably could’ve worded it in a more academic manner, but Mark seemed to be translating it into another form just fine.

“I felt a lot like that after my encounter with Irene’s goons,” the leshy ruminated. “Maybe she could have done something to him- attacked him in a way he wouldn’t be able to talk about.”

“But...” Chan fumbled with the possibility. “We’ve been able to talk about everything.”

“Maybe,” Mark amended. “But it could also be possible that he doesn’t know either.”

Meanwhile, on the second floor catwalk:

“What does that mean?” asked Minho.

“The mind works in a million different ways,” explained Yugyeom, leading him around the way. “It’s as complicated as it is vulnerable. All the tricks one could play on it is astronomical.”

“So... you’re saying she’s somehow gotten into his head even more?”

“From what I can tell, it’s kind of her specialty. But, somehow, yeah. Maybe something that made her absence affect him more than her

actual presence.”

“Like, what she’s wanted him to feel for years.”

“Exactly.”

“But why now? What difference would it make?”

“All this is happening because you all went out of state for the first time in literal years, right?” Minho chose a polite, silent *touché* as an answer. “People are remembering you- what they knew of you, what they had against you- the people who you’ve been trying to forget for ages. I hate to say it, but this might’ve been a long time coming.”

King headbutted his ankle, cocked his head up at Minho, perhaps wondering why they couldn’t have made a holiday out of eternity every once in a while. “Is there a way we can help it?”

“Right now, we can’t be sure- I mean, we don’t really know what’s going on here.” Yugyeom scooped the Sphinx cat up in his arms. “But if you want to try, I’d suggest figuring it out fast.”

With those kind of possibilities, it was easier said than done. When Chan and Minho returned to each other, neither could come up with a point.

"How could *he* not know what's wrong with himself?" Chan whispered behind the pillar.

"I don't know, ask Yugyeom," Minho hissed back. "But it's a possibility. Remember when he had pneumonia but didn't know for two weeks?"

"Jesus, just how bad did Irene fuck with him?"

"I don't know." Right at that moment, their topic of discussion entered from the second floor. "But we could try asking him."

Slipping out from behind the pillar, the pair managed to maintain their mad dash to a leisurely stroll. "Jisung!" called Chan. The spriggan jumped at the sound of his name. "Hey, we wanted to talk about earlier-"

"No need," Jisung said, clipped and quick as his smile. "I was just in a mood. Woke up on the wrong side of the bed."

"I-" Chan pulled back. Already, the brow of eternal pocketed concern was drawing in. "That's it?"

"Yup. Didn't mean to snap at you guys, just had to, collect my thoughts, calm down. We're good. Right as rain."

Where Chan had concern, Minho had satire. "Right as rain?"

"Yup." Without any change in expression or tone, he walked out of the conversation, straight for the fields. The duo watched him go, shut the door, without so much as a worried look.

"It's worse than we thought," murmured Chan.

"He's fucked up bad," Minho agreed.

Even with that as the case, not everyone was far enough from the clouds to notice.

All the way down at the beach shore, Hyunjin was too far gone to even know.

"Okay, it can't be that crazy- it's only been thirty-eight years," Hyunjin rambled, circling back and forth. He'd practically paced his own grave. "Who am I kidding, that's exactly *why* it's crazy. What the hell am I thinking?"

"Maybe that you'd get to the point already," mused Jinyoung, reclining against the fallen tree, picking the sand out from under his nails.

Hyunjin shook his head; whether or not he'd heard his brother was unclear. "I can't do this. I can't live. I want- I'm gonna crash the car into a telephone pole, no seatbelt on, standing on the gas, I can't do this anymore."

"It seems as though God truly does give his hardest battles to the silliest of geese."

"Why do I get like this every time I so much as *think* about it? I've been wanting to for years- if forever's all I've got, I need to take a *chance*."

"What are you even *talking about*?"

"How do I tell Jisung I love him?"

That shut both the Hwang brothers up damn quick. Hyunjin's jaw shut while Jinyoung's dropped the politest bit open.

"I mean-" Hyunjin swallowed his words dry and knocked them back. "No. Yeah."

Jinyoung's mouth shut in astonishment. He pushed off the tree. "Welcome to WatchMojo, where today we're counting down our top ten picks for the Gayest Shit I've Ever Seen-"

"*Ugghh*."

"Thirty-eight years you've been pining after this kid?"

"And living in denial *and* hiding them away in a place where they can't absolutely wreck me."

"I stand corrected." Hyunjin resumed in his pacing. "And you're sure you're ready?"

"Ninety percent, yeah." Pause. "Eighty."

"That's substantial."

"Are you actually going to be a decent sibling and help me out here?"

"Well, there's a lot I'm still trying to understand! From what I know, your relationship's been pretty rocky from the start. And all that denial you just brought up- why have you been doing that?"

"I don't know, because I thought it'd actually help? Because I thought, 'maybe if I pretend these feelings don't exist, they'll actually go away, and I'll remember what it's like *not* to want to be with him and only him?'"

"And, if I read this correctly, that didn't work?"

"Obviously not."

"Well, then why'd you change your mind? What about now is different?"

"I don't know!" Hyunjin threw out his arms. "Everything? I mean- we've been to all these new places, had all these moments. I got you back- I know that's not going away. And Irene's finally going to leave *him* alone so he won't..." *Be going away too.* Hyunjin decided to cut that part out. "It just feels right."

Even with all the years they'd been apart, Jinyoung still had that look on his face- like he knew exactly what he was thinking. "And you're sure about it?"

Hyunjin let a breath go. "Yeah. For the first time in a long time, yeah. I know too well how it feels just to keep it all inside. If I even have a chance, I want to know what it feels like for it to be out in the open."

Jinyoung folded his arms, preparing a test question. "And do you know why you love him?"

The answer to that he'd always known. Now, he could finally let it come to surface. "Because I feel like I can," Hyunjin said quietly.

"Because it- it's safe and dangerous at the same time, but it feels like it won't bite me in the ass later on."

"And you've been scared of that for this long?"

"Of course I have, you dickhead." Jinyoung chuckled in the sand. "It's why I've been pushing him away for almost four whole decades instead of getting closer. Plus." Brow raise. Hyunjin's face warmed despite the cool sea breeze. "Every time I try, it always seems like... like he's the one who opens the door again."

"No way is he in love with you too."

"Shut *up*."

"Hey, I've cited my sources--"

"Please don't tell me you've *talked* to my *coven* about this."

"- and they agree that yeah, that's pretty much how it happens." Hyunjin was very intensely contemplating shoving his head into the sand like an ostrich. "Not that you're completely stringing him along- I mean, sometimes it's Jisung who chickens out--"

"Really comforting--"

"- but only because he's scared of committing to people he can actually see a future with, or something along those lines." Hyunjin's irritation softened. "Seems like you've both been pretty afraid of each other for a while."

"Do you..." The pacing stopped for good. "Do you really think that's something that can be helped?"

Jinyoung offered a genial smile. "If you've been willing to wait this long while wanting it this badly, I suppose you've got some idea as how to test the theory."

"I don't know how willing he'll be to willing to listen- he's a stubborn son of a bitch, but." Hyunjin tried to keep his own from showing.

"Maybe if I find the right words, if we talk things out, then... I don't know. Maybe it'll get us somewhere."

"All I can picture him saying is 'Took you long enough.' Long as he's still standing by the time you're done, at least."

"So you agree?"

"To what?"

"That..." Hyunjin swallowed again. "You think it's a good idea?"

Jinyoung looked like he was contemplating shoving Hyunjin's head in the sand himself. "After all these years, I've gotten to know about love," he said. "And I know you. And I know that when you run from something you want, it's because it scares the shit out of you- either because you think you don't deserve it or that it'll leave you on its own." *. "I've seen how you are around him- how you care about him in your own way. How you do it even though you're scared. And let me tell you- whatever happened between you two all those years ago? Not one second of that shows in the way he looks at you."

"Please tell me you're being serious."

"Please, my ass, kid, the same goes to you. When you brought him into the Gulf, you weren't thinking about finding me, or getting away from Irene, or anything else but him. I've lived long enough to know something when I see it, and that was *something*. If you're ready to admit that too, then you better let him know."

Hyunjin was back at the precipice, heart thudding and preparing for a nosedive right into the abyss. "How do I know if I'll be ready for it- for actually being there for him? Hell, if he's even forgiven me for all I've put him through?"

"You're gonna have all kinds of fear walking into this. If he's the standup guy you've been drawing out for me, he'll understand. You'll draw from the reason why you wanted to do this in the first place and learn every step of the way, and he won't even see a reason why you need to forgive him."

"Well, what should I say? How'll I know if it's right?"

"You just let it come from the heart. Everything's already in there- if you let it come out how you mean it, everything'll turn out fine."

From the heart, huh. Hyunjin supposed it was time he started taking his own advice. "And... you really think he'll listen?"

Jinyoung barked out a laugh. "That kid sees the stars in your eyes. If they haven't gone out in this long, I can't think of a reason why he won't."

And damningly, foolishly, Hyunjin could feel himself start to believe him.

After up to three hours in the woods, one would think Jisung would come up with some kind of solution.

But alas, even the solace of the woods couldn't distract him from the fact that he had snapped at some of his favorite people in the universe for no given reason, pop lock dropped facefirst into a panic attack, and coughed up unfermented pond scum that could not have been good for the trees, and *still* couldn't figure out why.

Perhaps there was a logic to this situation- even in a world chock full of weird magic, that still had to exist. Maybe he'd gotten sick overnight? No, then he would've felt the symptoms before. The only time he'd felt even close to this was when that tokoloshe stayed at Levanter for one night, stole their Fruit Loops, and gave him yellow fever just by shaking his hand. *But this is something else.* It honed all his senses to a fine point, meaning he could hear snatches of

everything, feel every breeze, see in flickering spots. If he focused long enough, he could convince himself he was sane for a few moments, but then a new wave hit- one of roiling nausea and and overwhelming rush of everything at once. There was nothing else he could do but curl himself into the tiniest little ball and let it pass. Most of the time, it didn't even feel like he was in control of his own thoughts, and Jisung didn't know of any fever with those kinds of symptoms.

He couldn't go about avoiding everyone the whole day while he did it, either- he was currently living with two of the most compassionate covens out there. *And* he'd narrowly escaped Chan and Minho- if they were the first to get to him, then there was more coming.

Horribly, he remembered Hyunjin's shiny split glances over the breakfast table, grinning in a ring of surfwater like he had in Irene's tapestry. *If there's anyone I have to stay away from, it's him.*

Walking back into the courtyard, the scene looked safe enough. Just the usual suspects- Seungmin showing Youngjae Studio Ghibli on his phone, Jeongin rambling excitedly about chemical poisons to an affectionately listening MarkSon, and-

"Jisung!"

Motherfucking Felix and his angelic sixth sense. *How could I have possibly forgotten.*

On turning around with a practiced fake smile, he saw it wasn't just Felix, but his trusty backup demon Changbin as well. *The mouth and the muscle in collaboration- this ought to be good.*

"Changbin, Felix." *Just get the apology done and over with- that's all they want to hear.* "About earlier, I'm really-"

"Don't bother," Felix interrupted. Only he could get away with interrupting you and have it sound kind. "Really, we're cool."

We are? “We are?”

“Yeah,” said Changbin. “I mean, obviously you were a little ticked-“

“Not that you didn’t make some valid points,” put in Felix.

“Even if they were a bit, *ahem*, questionable.”

Are they really? “That’s good to hear.”

“We just wanted to let you know that we get it,” Felix told him, somehow straight-faced even though they both knew he was lying through his teeth. “It’s been a rough week, you’ve had a lot to deal with.”

“Irene coming and almost repo’ing your life for the millionth time,” added Changbin.

“So we’re just saying, we get if you’re feeling a little tense. Changbin and I-“ point was punctuated by the demon getting jabbed in the shoulder by his elbow. “- just wanted to let you know we’re here.”

“And willing to talk if you need it,” finished Changbin, completing the line.

Just a little tense? Tense was his face muscles at this very moment using every bit of control they had not to betray him with uncontrollable laughter. “Well, that’s... that’s nice.”

“But like, seriously though.” Felix dropped his voice. “Did something happen that you’re not telling us?”

“Which you don’t have to spill if you don’t want to,” Changbin added in a a low tone that matched. “But, y’know. Still.”

Have you two always been this nosy? “What wouldn’t I be telling you?”

“Well, I dunno, you’ve just been acting kinda... cagey ever since you talked Irene off the island?” Felix cringed at himself at the word.

“Which I know has a better way of being phrased, but you also didn’t tell us how you did it.”

”Which was especially intriguing considering neither of you walked out with any scars or bruises.” The demon got a smack to the head.

“What? I had my money on a fight.”

Just because you don’t know how to handle your problems any other way doesn’t mean I don’t. “There was nothing of the sort. Just two people, talking things out like reasonable adults, and one thing I said struck a chord with her.”

“No offense, but.” This time, Felix didn’t choose his words delicately.

“This entire island’s having trouble believing that.”

Goodness, the whole lot of them can’t keep their ears closed. “That so?”

“Everybody knows your history with her, dude.” Changbin gestured at their backs. “It’s no secret that she’s always had a way of getting into your head.”

“Figuratively or literally,” added Felix.

What? “Literally? What does that mean?”

”What *does* that mean?” prompted Changbin.

”Wasn’t there that one time? 2008, when she sent a record with her letter? It was some cursed U2 vinyl- Zooropa, I think. The first song that played was The Wanderer and you almost walked right off the roof.”

She knew music would get to you. “I was just checking the distance from there to the floor.”

"And dipping a toe in the air to try it out- you're lucky Chan never finishes his spring reading on time," countered Changbin. "We hadn't seen hypnosis since the late 70's. Psychedelic rock was kind of a gateway."

Hold up. "And you're saying that's what happened? That she got her hands on some dark magic to trick me?" Why did that sound so... *devious?*

"Well, yeah. You acted like a zombie through the whole run of the track. I thought you knew- you said she was old fashioned like that."

"Trickery, the magic of cowards," Felix quoted. "Or at least that's what Seungmin called it."

It all sounded like her: taking the old ways and bringing them into the new, only ten times more evil. And the scariest part was, she could do it right under your nose, draw you in close and pull the blindfold over your eyes before you even knew you were facing a cliff. *May you treasure your peace and walk safely among the green.*

And just like that, the cold sweat had returned, prickling over Jisung's skin and picking his heart rate back up, pins and needles in the spot where she'd last touched him, on the nape of his neck.

Of course. "Well, that's fun," Jisung murmured, dropping his gaze from theirs as it scattered, tracking through the sand, making a path for the door. "I'll, uh. Just go get some air."

And, for the second time that day, he raced across the courtyard as fast as he could- only this time, not just to get away.

The clearing where Irene had been waiting for him just yesterday was a barren stage: weeping willows vacating the premises, grass clean of footprints, pond glistening in the late afternoon sun. Just before the rim, a fairy ring circle of mushrooms had already sprouted. On the surface, it looked innocent enough, coincidental, even. But anyone who'd lived an inhuman life knew the message

that lay underneath- something magical had been there. Someone who wanted to make their presence known.

Jisung knelt in the center of the circle, yanking a mushroom out of the ring and crushing it into powder in his fist, sprinkling the remains in the water. A simple spell, didn't even need an incantation: just by doing so, he would come into contact with the last being who had set foot inside the circle. *And with any luck, she'll be waiting for me.*

The sunlight flickered in waves over the surface of the pond, lining the shape of a bust profile. Jisung's own reflection morphed in the water, took instead the form of Irene, smiling up at him like she'd been waiting all along.

"Jisung," she greeted amiably. "I was wondering when you might call."

"Enough of your games, Irene. For *once*."

"Well, what's with that tone? You were much friendlier in seeing me off."

"*Stop it!*" There was more panic than anger in the demand; he couldn't even keep the quiver out of his voice. "What did you do to me?"

"So it's already started taking effect, eh?" Irene's reflection seemed to lean forward. "How splendid."

"How did you- what- *what* did you-"

"Calm down, darling, it's nothing fatal. Just a hex that'll last a day. That's all it needs, anyway."

"All *what* needs? For fucking *what*?"

"My, my, that temper of yours really needs controlling," chided Irene. "As well as your voice. You wouldn't want the rest of your coven

finding out, would you?" His molars ground together, spreading her smile wider. "Hopefully you haven't snapped at them too, have you?"

Jisung squeezed his eyes shut, grimaced at the last interaction he'd had with them. "How do I stop it?"

"I think that's a question best answered in person." Her face brightened with malicious glee. "What about that siren of yours? Have you driven him away too?"

Not yet. "What's your angle here? I thought you were finally going to leave me alone."

"It's a test," she replied evenly. "To see how much you can handle. If you really can make it on your own- if your 'family' will be there like I would."

Jisung's knuckles went white as his fists gripped the grass. "I told you to stay out of my coven's business."

"And when did I ever say this was about your coven?" Irene laughed, primly, ominously. "If I were you, I'd worry a little more about myself."

The clouds shifted over the sun, and her visage faded. In a rash last attempt, Jisung rammed his hand through the water, reaching for any answer she could have left behind. But all he was left with was dripping cold, pins and needles, and a slowly setting sun.

- and the next thing he knew, it was dinnertime. Laughter clogged the air with the smell of grilled fish and fresh lemonade; apparently Jaebum had made a try at seafood paella. But if anyone was saying anything about it, it went right over Jisung's head, dissipated into whispers before it could reach his ears. His mind was shrouded in fog, warping the sounds of happiness all around, blurring his gaze at his own two hands, which didn't even feel like his. It felt as if he was staring at them from a birds eye view, Alice tumbling headfirst down the rabbit hole, an outsider to all the joy that surrounded. *And no one's even noticed at all.*

Jisung glanced up woozily. Their faces were lit up with smiles, embellished with the gold light of the candelabras, but it looked staged, temporary, a scene fit for a silver screen. All of it seemed to happen in slow motion- the spread of every grin, every smile that turned someone's eyes to crescent moons, every booming, garish laugh that was passed down the table. *They can't see what I see*, he thought. *Feel what I feel*. They didn't even know. *It's as though I'm not even there*.

Jisung started to wonder just what difference would it make if he just up and left the table right now when the timely clink of metal to glass rang through the chatter: Jinyoung making a toast.

The leviathan rose to stand before everyone, smiling at their eyes on him. *A real center of attention is never fazed*. "On now the seventh day of their stay, I'd like to propose a toast to Stray Kids, who have so kindly graced us with their presence and treated us as one of their own."

"By eating all the goddamn Funyuns," Yugyeom grated through a grin.

The coven of Got7 clapped commiseratively while Jisung's soaked it in, faking modesty, Minho waving them off with, "Ladies, ladies, one at a time."

"And to our union," Jinyoung went on.

"And the hope that it provides?" Felix piped hopefully, dodging Seungmin's self-ordered Hit.

"Yes, Felix, that. But also," his eyes slipped meaningfully down to Hyunjin, who'd taken his seat beside him for the night. "To the brother it brought back. And the chance he gave me to try again."

"Fuck yeah," whooped Chan, raising his glass, and the applause started up again as Jinyoung ruffled the younger siren's hair. His

smile was out for everyone to see, not even dulling for the moment he pushed his hand away.

Jinyoung went on, waxing over old friends and new, and Jisung wanted to scream. *Who cares about what we're doing here in the present?* They were all here in hiding; had they forgotten? From the real world, from the enemy- was there even a difference anymore?

Who cares? While his body was going numb, his mind was going haywire. His head was an anvil on his shoulders, filled with a kingdom of bees. His tongue felt too heavy for his mouth. His throat was closing up out of guilt for something- could have been *anything* - sealing up the words bubbling up from the cavern below. His vision had gone fuzzy with haze, with drowsiness, with an unearthly shimmer. The food on his plate- he couldn't even remember piling it on, not when he didn't even feel like touching a morsel. The savory smell of it wafted to his nose like perfume- garlic and saffron tinged mussels and shrimp on a bed of yellow rice. It should have made his mouth water, eyes open, make him react to *something*. But nothing came; nothing was enough to drag him out of his head, make him think anything but: *Who cares?*

And who should? A hum filled his ears as he realized it. They were all the same amount of insignificant, just biding their time until the next wave hit. After a lifetime of forever, avoiding the trouble on their own little islands, it was all they knew how to do. *Everyone's just going through the motions- they're just like me.* Except they were content to keep pretending, laughing, joking, filling their bellies with stories and happy memories as if they would ever run out of time, pretending, pretending, pretending.

And Jisung couldn't do it anymore. *Who cares?* The question pounded against the cell of his brain.

Who cares?

"Who cares?"

His shout stopped the speech, drew all eyes to him at last. Jisung imagined it reaching Driskill Mountain.

"Who cares about rediscovered connections, old friends and new, about any of this shit? It's all just gonna rot away the minute we leave this place- all the conversations we had, all the games we played, all the promises we made, are we even going to remember that? Are we really just gonna sit here and act like we're not gonna say goodbye and act like none of this ever happened the minute we part ways? Not even moving *on*, just walking over it. We've gotten so used to doing it all this time, we just do it for everything! Is it even important anymore? Does it even matter- does *anything matter?!"*

His voice drifted into the night, and the humming went away. Jisung came back to the present at last.

All chatter had been wiped out, flooded with heartless silence. Gaping eyes pinned to him like arrowheads, sharpened to a piercing point. Somewhere through the outburst he'd risen to his feet; but though he towered over them he felt none of the power. Under their bewildered, shellshocked gazes, he felt stripped of it completely, felt picked apart and laid bare, pinned to a cross and suspended before awoken acolytes.

Hyunjin's was the worst of them all. His gaze wasn't judging, wasn't horrified, but confused, hurt, like he'd just been slapped across the face.

The back of Jisung's neck prickled to life again, with something that felt like hives. There was no space in his head to retreat into anymore; the throw pillow where he'd knelt had been flung out an open window.

He staggered backwards, and no one made a move to stop him. He turned around, swayed into a pillar for support, and no one offered a hand.

Jisung ran off into the forest, and no footsteps followed behind.

One hour later, all lights were snuffed out by the chill brought on by the dark. The palace was serene in its silence, golden filigree winking in the moonlight like the sky's own stars. The forest beyond was made even more imposing by the night, lit up like a page from a storybook. Leaves moved by the breeze whispered to each other a song they'd been spinning for years, of the stories of those who passed through.

But tonight, the scene it played was the aftermath of a tragedy: a clearing cast beneath a ghostly spotlight, illuminating the spriggan with his hands braced on the boulder, shoulders rising and falling with each haggard breath. Slowly, carefully, the siren approached from the shadows.

The branches crackled hesitantly under his boots. Jisung tensed but didn't look up. He knew who it was; no one else would have tried for a sneak attack. "Are you going to ask me to apologize?"

"Everyone went to bed a while ago." Hyunjin stepped into the light. "Mark told me you might be here."

"Because apparently panic makes a man predictable." Jisung turned, leaned his back against the rock. "So. Go on. Say it."

"Say what?"

"Please, if anyone's going to be honest with me, it's you." His voice had eroded into a rasp, stone grating against stone. In all the years he'd known him, Hyunjin couldn't recognize it from a day. "Yell at me for interrupting your brother's bullshit toast. Rip me a new one. Let it out. Just get it done and over with."

He spluttered, choking on a scoff. "I'm not- that's not why I'm here!"

"Change in character. How surprising."

"Why was that the first thing to come to your mind?"

Jisung laughed. "Boy, would I have a field day with answering that."

"What is the- *God*." The empathy Hyunjin had walked in with was dying out fast. "Are you okay?"

The smirk playing over Jisung's face slipped away, left his expression cold and hostile. "Of course you'd ask a fool question like that."

They faced each other like old enemies searching for tells, flipping through age-old blueprints. *He's the shimmer in your head*, the hex sneered to Jisung. *The beauty that blinds you*.

Hyunjin swallowed. "You've been acting strange all day," he said, deflecting to maintain the peace. "Snapping at the others, running off at random times. Something happened that you haven't told us about."

"Stop *doing* that," Jisung muttered under his breath.

"Doing what?"

"Fucking *that*! Talking like you know what I'm going through, like I'm a goddamn *book* you're reading. You don't know *shit*."

"Obviously, I don't! You won't tell anyone anything!"

"Maybe there's nothing to tell."

"Bullshit," Hyunjin retaliated. "You haven't been fighting with anyone since today. You don't have anything against them."

"Then what do you want me to say? That I didn't mean it?" His mouth screwed shut. "Still living in a goddamn storybook world. What else would I expect?" Jisung shrugged. "You ever consider that maybe there isn't anything for me to explain? Maybe this is just me- maybe I'm just being more honest."

The barb sliced through like steel, drawing blood through the skin. Just yesterday they'd been at the shore, laughing, watching the sun set. *What could have changed in a night?* "I don't believe that."

Jisung rolled his eyes, not out of annoyance but amusement. "And why, pray tell, is that?"

The first wound of the night had already been made. Hyunjin glared through the pain. "Because there has to have been something that *bitch* said that made you think fighting everyone away would solve your problems."

Jisung always found it amazing, miraculous, even, that Hyunjin could listen to the erratic jumble of words that poured out of his mouth and answer with the truth that he'd been trying to arrive at all along. But now he wanted it gone: *what kind of fool was I to have been so open? He shouldn't have such space in my head- not when he doesn't know, doesn't care.*

"You don't know what you're talking about," he grumbled, pushing off the rock.

Hyunjin followed; damn him, his heart, and all his futile attempts, he stepped farther into the clearing. "There's no other reason it could be," he went on. "She's the whole reason we're here. You wouldn't stop flinching at every flower you saw rustle in the wind, and now you won't stop picking fights- it's what she *does*. She puts you on edge, twists you up so bad you can't even think straight."

"Holy shit, you're gonna win a Peabody Award with that kind of reporting." Jisung skirted along the edge of the shadows.

"Come on, you can't tell me she just left without doing *some* shady shit."

"You know what, wasn't gonna bring it up, but yeah, she gave me a brain tumor and two months left to live."

Hyunjin stayed behind- close enough to pull him back, far enough to resist. "Could you stop running the fuck away?"

"Adds to the thrill of the chase, doesn't it? Makes you feel like you're getting somewhere."

"Why do you do this for everyone who worries about you?"

He gave Jisung exactly ten seconds to respond, but he didn't. He stopped at the brink of escape, struck still.

Then he glanced over his shoulder with a look worse than hate, worse than the thoughtless malice of every beast they had ever faced. "Out of everything you could have said," he said quietly, dark as the boogeyman at the end of the unlit hallway, "why did you think I'd believe that?"

The second cut hurt worse than the first; Hyunjin couldn't keep from shrinking back into his own shame. "Is it really that hard to believe?"

How dare he, Jisung's anger snarled, fiery in his veins. After years, years of stringing me along in his little labyrinth, how dare he act like it was nothing.

"I suppose you can answer me on that," he said, spinning on his heel, forcing Hyunjin to step back. "Obviously, you have a lot to say, so why not?"

"Jisung-"

"*When,*" Jisung cut him off, scraping the word through gritted teeth. "*When* have you ever cared about me? When it mattered to you? When *you* decided I wasn't such a fucking waste of space, those precious little moments? Tell me, I'm dying to know."

"I-" Hyunjin stifled back the quaver in his voice, swallowed it dry. "I know it's been like that in the past, but-"

"But what? You didn't mean it? It was only for fun? You didn't consider how *I* might feel?" He tried again. "Of course you didn't. Because you don't know how it feels, *any* of it. To always be second guessing myself, to wonder if it was something that *I* did, to find the most beautiful being you've ever met in your life at a pond at night in the middle of the fucking woods, only for him to take one look at you and decide you're the shit on his shoe."

The final sentence was spat like acid in the space between them, hissing and splitting a chasm. Hyunjin's face was blown apart something wide and soft, an ache in his chest where the sting had reached his heart. *Oh*. "Jisung-"

"Don't even try," Jisung seethed, emotion seeping through his fury. *You romantic, you fool, banish it; you're not a poet*. "You knew. You knew, you *always* knew. When have I ever, since the first instant I heard your fucking voice, tried to hide it? When have I not tried to tell you, in every word I've ever said, every move I've ever made, everything I've ever done for you? You're the one who blots it out, keeps it from happening. You don't want to hear it. Obviously, if you keep it out of the open air, it isn't true. Maybe that worked for you." Horribly, unforgivably, a tear beaded in the corner of his eye. "But it didn't for me."

Hyunjin felt the third cut deep in the center of his chest- he welcomed it. *I deserve it*. "Jisung," he whispered, his name soft as the petals of a hibiscus on his lips. "I'm sorry."

"You are now. Now that you've heard it, that you've finally dug it out of me. Nice job. Congrats." The spriggan smiled, eyes vacant and sad, and the tear slipped down, streaking a clear scar down his cheek. "Guess I can't pretend I'm the only being in the world who doesn't love you anymore."

He breezed past him, making another escape. Hyunjin stumbled clumsily after; he couldn't let him go. "Jisung, *wait*-"

"I used to imagine what it would be like," Jisung stopped again, a windup toy out of steps, reciting a monologue. "To have you. To be with you. Alternate endings, what would've happened if you loved me back." A sliver of his profile peeked out behind his back, the delicate corner of his mouth pulled up. "The garden where we sang- you'd ask me out instead of saying goodnight. The alley of Love Cherry Motion, on Valentine's Day- you'd pull me closer instead of running away. The dance floor in Cloak and Dagger- you'd kiss me instead of letting me go. All the things I wasn't brave enough to do, you'd make happen. Only if you cared enough." He tilted his head towards the moon, forbidding any more tears. "We'd write a song of our own together, make something else just as beautiful. But I guess I can just chalk that up to more wishful thinking."

Hyunjin could feel the knot in his throat drawing tighter, weighing him down, holding him back. *I can't let it.* Not this time.

He reached for Jisung's hand, the first letter of his name on the tip of his tongue. The spriggin flinched away before he could graze skin, jolting him back. Jisung lifted his hand to examine it, flexed his fingers like he was waking them up, clenched them into a bloodless fist.

"So don't tell me you care." Hyunjin had only taken a breath when he turned around again, so fast he couldn't even react, three swift steps into his space that would have been close enough to inflict a real wound: thorn to the heart, under the ribs, through the throat. Jisung glowered, springtime withering instead of blooming in them. "Don't tell me that, when you *know* it's the very thing I want more than anything."

They stood like that, both poised to move but not attack; there was no breath they could take without it being his; there was no move they could make without one admitting defeat to the other.

So Hyunjin didn't run. Instead, he lifted his chin, evened out the playing field. "And if I meant it?"

Jisung scoffed, drew back. "Then you'd be losing at your own game."

Hyunjin, who was out of energy and filled with way too much emotion than he could properly voice, watched him walk back out towards the edge of the clearing.

- and blinked at the flash and crack of the root lashing out the ground, curling around his wrist and dragging him forward.

Hyunjin only had time to summon a puddle's worth of defense from the pond and transform it into a dagger, aiming the point at the hollow of Jisung's neck before the root released him and the spriggan's hands caught his waist, freeing the gasp from his lips.

This close, there was nothing either could hide now. Jisung picked him apart with his eyes, fury parting for disbelief, curiosity for soft, genuine astonishment. *Oh*. He didn't even see the blade at his throat. "You do mean it," he whispered. *He really does*.

Finally, Hyunjin thought, as his weapon evaporated to mist, heart hammering in his chest. *Finally, after all this fighting, all these games, all this chasing and bickering and hoping for truth, it's finally going to happen*.

But then Jisung laughed. Dropped his hands, tipped his head back, and *laughed*. "How *embarrassing* for you!"

And just as fast, the moment was gone. "What the *fuck* are you *talking* about?"

"What else could I be talking about? You!" Jisung was positively bouncing, giddy with triumph. "The siren of Bermuda, Apollo of the Seven Seas, most eligible bachelor in Eldritch, wants the weird spriggan who plays The Beatles to his garden. It goes against every fiber of your being. It's hilarious!"

It's like he's describing another person. "How can you say that?"

"Say the truth? With a smile, of course. You can see it, can't you?"

Hyunjin's jaw dropped, trying and failing to pick itself back up again. The demon inside of Jisung cackled. *He doesn't even know he exposed he is*, it crowed. *Now we can go for the kill.*

Deep inside, some tiny, helpless little speck of consciousness cowered imprisoned beneath it, begging for it to stop. *Please*, he begged. *Please don't do this*. But he couldn't control the moves he made anymore; it was all out of his hands.

"How long have you been hiding it?" Jisung asked, still grinning like an idiot. "How long have you planned your insults, prepared your jokes? How long have you known?" *That's not enough- get to the good part!* "How long have you been trying to convince yourself that you didn't?"

It was then that, out of all the shock, all the bewilderment, Hyunjin winced. "I- I wasn't."

There it is. "Yes, you were," Jisung pressed. "That's why you threw all those insults at me, flaunted all those guys in front of my face. You were trying to throw me off the trail *and* distract yourself at the same time." An incredulous chuckle. "But in the end, you couldn't do it."

If Hyunjin were able to move, he would have punched him. "You don't understand."

"Don't I?" Jisung's smile toned down to a smirk- Smug Bastard, the worst kind. "You thought it was something that'd go away at first. You hoped it would- just so you wouldn't have to tarnish yourself, ruin that reputation, make yourself sink so low as to be with me." He stalked his way towards Hyunjin. "So you found other ways to pass the time. Other reasons to make me doubt. "

"That wasn't it!"

"You're right." He took one last step. "You were afraid. That it'd turn into something you couldn't break off, control, switch off whenever you wanted. You've tricked everyone else into thinking I'm the sucker in this situation, when it's you." They were toe to toe, now, eye to eye. "That's why you've never kissed me, even when you had the chance. Why you always run at the last second. Why you can't say it even now." He cocked his head, chuckled at the irritation in drew. "You're afraid of me."

"I am *not*."

"Then why haven't you thrown me in that pond yet?"

"If you don't shut up in the next five seconds, I'll drown you in it."

"Then do something about it, siren."

They'd switched positions now: Hyunjin's back was to the boulder, Jisung's to the open air. They were parallel to one another, a wave rearing over the steady shore. The wind had toned down to white noise, which muted itself to silence.

"Tell me," Jisung whispered, the ghost of a smirk around his lips, "to leave."

Please, his conscience begged, drowning under the weight of every bitterness he'd ever felt in his life. *Please, say it.*

But Hyunjin didn't move. Didn't breathe, didn't say a word. Just glanced down, for a blip of a second, at the smile that was no longer there.

"I knew it." And Jisung clasped a hand around the nape of his neck and pulled him in, crushing their mouths together.

Just like that, the tsunami gave way for the earthquake, all the work God had put into creating the world in seven days brought down by one instant of contact. Hyunjin's mouth fell slackly open, more out of

surprise than invitation, and for half a second Jisung's pulse jumped, thinking he'd miscalculated the entire scenario, but then he was weaving his arms around his neck, closing his eyes, kissing him back, and it was the climax of his dreams and nightmares all at once, because the one bit of self control that remained in Jisung was screaming, *It isn't me, know it isn't me!* But they'd shut themselves off to the rest of the world, confining themselves to their own sweet battleground, letting it fall apart under their feet.

They kissed the way they sparred: relishing the bruises that bloomed at pressing too close, as if the taste of blood was victory. It filled them with so much adrenaline and exuberance it almost felt like too much. Jisung's hands drifted to the front of Hyunjin's shirt and guided him backwards, step after stumbling step, until his back hit the stone of the boulder. The siren gasped, opening his eyes only for a second to see the spriggan devilishly grin and wrenched him back into another searing kiss, hooking a leg around his ankle the way he had when they'd danced in that roadside bar, to keep him from leaving.

You've got him where you want him, the hex urged. *Now get your revenge- make him hurt.* Jisung wasn't going anywhere.

His fingers found their own way, tracking Hyunjin's shatterpoints with deliberate intent, mapping every place Jisung had ever dreamed of touching for himself: the groove of his collarbone, the place where his heartbeat could be felt, the span of his waist. *See, we're a match*, he thought absently, hands finding his hips and gripping tight, pulling their bodies flush like magnets. Hyunjin sighed in his mouth, and a thrill of power surged through him, the ability he had- he was the rogue river, sweeping the tempter of the sea away in his current.

Hyunjin's hands cupped his cheek, grasped his jacket- that stupid flannel-denim that he'd *never* take off -and still, it wasn't enough. He kissed him like he'd never be able to get it out of his system, like the fire could rage for days; he could taste him like a paradise long since lost, midnight on his skin, the goddamn Milky Way in the cut of his teeth, and it didn't make up for the words he hadn't said. *I meant it*, he thought, pushing a hand through his hair, pulling him closer so

that he might hear. *I mean it, and I'm sorry, and I love and love and love you.*

But then Jisung broke off and took all the words with him, along with all the air in his lungs. And because he couldn't look anywhere else, Hyunjin looked at him.

He was the *Le genie du mal** molded to skin; his hands had the cold, relentless grip of marble, body drawn and sculpted with poetic strength, ruthless eyes condemning Hyunjin with every second he stole looking into them, holding none of the gentility he'd shown in the damp alley of Love Cherry Motion- not a star in sight. *Does he see it?* Hyunjin felt the hope in him rise. *Does he know now?*

Jisung shoved him back against the rock, face twisted into a scowl like he'd never been more repulsed with anything in his life. Diminished to an ember, only a witness to Hyunjin's stricken blue eyes, his conscience whimpered: *what have I done?*

"Pathetic," he snarled. "What kind of idiot was I to ever love you?"

A needle drove into his heart, connecting every wound he'd received that night and slicing him to pieces. "What?"

And he didn't even get an answer, because Jisung had turned and started running again- from the clearing, from him, from *them*. "Wait." Hyunjin pushed off the rock, snapped out of his bliss-induced daze and forced himself into a run after him. *"Wait!"*

Jisung sprinted through the forest, ears buzzing, tears burning in his eyes. It didn't matter how many branches cut his cheeks, how many roots he tripped over, how many flowers he trampled in his haste. *I can't go back*. If he went back to that clearing, stopped for a second, it would all come crashing down. *I have to get away*. Get away, get away, get away.

In the grove, he stopped. He had to. *Either I'm seeing a mirage, or ghosts have already come to welcome me to the afterlife.*

Baekhyun stepped forward, the hand he reached out dappled by the moonlight shadows. A blue spark jumped out of his palm; over his pulse, where his shirt pulled back, a new tattoo: the tree of life, crossed through with an *I*. The symbol Jisung had seen on every Wild Hunt letter Irene had sent him. "Come on."

And it took him a minute. But Jisung finally got it. *This is what she wanted to do*. Burn his bridges, ruin his love. Face him with something he wouldn't be able to run from.

Jisung looked at the outstretched hand Baekhyun held out. *Make your choice*.

Hyunjin burst through the grove, wild eyed, cuts across his arms, breathing hard, cheeks flushed from running faster than he'd ever run his whole life. "Jisung!" The only shadows were the shadows of trees. "*Jisung!*"

But there, on the ground, right where the footsteps ended: a perfect little bunch of forget me nots.* A parting message. *A last goodbye*.

Hyunjin fell to his knees and let out a cry no one else could hear.

0X1=LOVESONG - TOMORROW X TOGETHER

*The Wanderer - U2, Johnny Cash

*Le genie du mal - Guillaume Geefs, my man. the second of its kind- the first was admonished for being too hot, so the sculptor responded in typical petty Renaissance artist fashion and made the second even hotter. go figure.

*Forget me not: Farewell, keep me in your thoughts, true love.

Dusk Till Dawn

Chapter 25: Dusk Till Dawn

Yeah, I know. Let me have it- tis what I deserve.

BUT in return you get another chapter!

The gang realizes Jisung is gone, and Hyunjin's not about to stand for that jilted lover business for one more minute until he finds him. We're not out of the woods yet, lads- we're bringing the battle in.

TW: brief descriptions of waterboarding ahead.

So we'll piss off the neighbors,

In a place that feels your tears, the place you lose your fears, yeah

Reckless behavior,

A place that is so pure, so dirty and raw...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Over the Fortunate Isles, the early morning had drained the color out of the sky. A languid slate gray settled over the trees, open to the quiet chirping of the morning goldfinches beginning their flight overhead, the sunshine hidden behind the clouds.

Colorless, motionless. A ghost town made overnight.

The tenants trickled out into the courtyard eyes half open, undeterred. Even the cats whispered to each other, noticing the change in the air.

"Were there warnings for a storm yesterday?" asked Felix groggily.

"Must've happened while we were asleep," said Minho, picking up King out of what was possibly cat-owner instinct.

"Maybe I've just gotten used to having you guys around," started Yugyeom, "but I feel like mornings are usually louder."

"After last night, I thought we'd all finally resigned to some silence," Seungmin muttered.

"But isn't there always something suspicious about, like, too much?"

Even after waiting in it, one couldn't help but notice that neither Hyunjin nor Jisung came down after them, and yet their beds were still empty.

"I remember both of them leaving," Mark ruminated. "But neither of them came back."

"*Knew* I should've set out a curfew," Chan cursed to himself.

"Come on, it's one island," Changbin argued. "They can't have gone too far."

They might have agreed, if that wasn't the moment Hyunjin came careening into the court yard, frenzied and frantic and flying at fasten-your-seatbelts level speed with a scattered crown of twigs and leaves sticking out of his hair. He skidded to a halt in the runway space they'd hastily cleared out for him, one hand clenched in a fist, panting like he'd taken a nosedive straight for the ocean floor and swam right back up.

When he finally regained enough energy to form proper words, the first thing he said was: "He's gone."

The breathless sentence tumbled out onto the dirt, staring them in the face. "Sorry," attempted Jeongin. "*Gone?*"

"How about we circle back to just where the fuck you've been," said Jinyoung, pacing to his brother's side.

But Hyunjin shook his head, waved him off, straightened up on his own. "I've been looking around all night, searching every inch of this place. Jisung's nowhere- not any part of the forest, the caves, the ocean. Didn't even leave behind a damn footprint."

"So- what?" Bambam threw a helpless arm out at the expanse behind them. "You're saying he just skipped the Isles and left?"

"Did some part of 'didn't even leave behind a footprint' not sum that up?"

"But I thought you went to talk to him." Minho had set down King in a sudden act of involvement. "Surely out of anyone here, he'd listen to you."

"You mean he wouldn't run from me, too?" The smile on his face was chock full of satire, the irony of what he knew they were implying. "Apparently I was the one to push him over the edge. Tried to get away from me as fast as he could. Before I could get to him, it was too late."

Even with their best efforts, it had happened, what they'd been trying to keep from happening for weeks: one of their own had left them.

"But why?" asked Jeongin. His voice had shrank smaller than a whisper. "Just two days ago we were fine."

"Exactly. Two days before he was found out." At their quizzical looks, he raised his eyebrows, splayed out his arms, waiting for them to get it. "Come *on*. We can't just pretend it's a coincidence."

"It's true," Chan murmured, siding with him. "We figured there was something wrong, but we never found out what."

"Did something happen to you during all this?" Jaebum gestured awkwardly at the siren. "No offense, I know you just sorta came back from searching the island, but like- you look like you got the shit kicked out of you."

Of course, that got everyone to take Hyunjin's appearance in for a second time, this time noticing the wrinkles in his shirt collar, the dark pink bruise on his lower lip, his flushed neck. "Only when we've reached a point where we can not only move past this but laugh about it with Jisung in the room will I tell you," he replied smoothly, dutifully avoiding his big brother's dubious gaze. "But as of now, those details aren't important."

"Which means it would have nothing to do with you chasing him down in the dead of night while the rest of us were sleeping?" piped Youngjae.

"Read the room like a book, and still came out with that," murmured Felix to Bambam. "Honestly, respect."

The sarcasm that had been keeping Hyunjin upright left for a sagging weariness, one that dropped his eyes to the floor.

"I don't know if anything I said could have made it better," he said softly. When he looked up, it was with determination. "What we do know is, whatever the fuck's been chasing that dumbass away from us, turning him against us, and voting him off the Isles isn't our Jisung. Dumbass he is, he wouldn't leave us after a day and not have a reason."

"Feel like this is going to turn into one of those quests you guys have been talking about," mused Jackson.

"If that's what you want to call it, go ahead, if it puts you in the right headspace. Goal of the day: find out what happened to Jisung, and trace it back to the motherfucker himself." Hyunjin released his fist, revealing the forget me nots sprouted from a forest far away. "'Cause he's got a lot of explaining to do."

Jisung's mind was swarmed in a fog of pitch black, swirling around him with voices from another lifetime.

"It's alright if you're scared..."

"We're your coven, your family..."

"Did you think we'd not care?"

"To old friends and new..."

"If I were you, I'd worry a little more about myself-"

"Jisung!"

He awoke in a gasp, reaching for thin air. Jisung squeezed his eyes shut, trying to bring them back with their carriers, but the memories had vanished back into his subconscious, leaving him to open his eyes to the present.

Jisung wasn't in the forest anymore; the last thing he'd seen was Baekhyun taking the hand he'd placed over his before everything plunged into a woozy darkness. Now, all he saw was white- no, not white. Almost pearlescent, but not white. It took up the shape of a bulb, coming to a pointed crux in the ceiling as a blush pink spiral. Instead of walls, there seemed to strips that folded over one another, keeping this egglike form, soft as silk, as skin, as-

Petals.

Yup. Jisung had found himself inside of a giant lotus flower.

If it weren't for the 70's, I think I'd be more weirded out by this, thought Jisung, sitting up inside. Is this what it felt like to be the center of an onion?

Maybe, if onions didn't have existential doubts and dread. Where were the others? Did they know he was here? Were they onions

too? There was a prickle in the back of his neck, fogging up his brain and short circuiting the answers. *How lost did I get not to remember?*

He only grazed the petals when the petals lifted, drifting out and apart, jolting him back into a frightened little cube. *"Jesus."*

The lotus flower bloomed, and Jisung's onion grew larger: a dirt cave, with vines and roots growing along the walls, his own flower resting on a lily pad in a bed of water. Beyond that, on a grassy bank, a little satyr boy was strumming the tune of Fireflies* on his lyre, pausing to nod hello at Jisung's arrival.

Jisung might have politely asked the child just what the hell kind of game this was because no, he did not believe his eyes, when- there, flowering on the ceiling, as if to imitate a blue sky: blue wisterias, just like his birth tree. *No.*

As if summoned by his horror, a finely manicured hand brushed aside the curtain of moss, and through it stepped Irene, wearing a robe of woven red rose petals and a warming smile, as if she was here to reassure him. *"Welcome to your new home, Jisung."*

A flash reel of moments glitched before him, flickers of what could have only been the day before: the world flashing by in too much color, a mind filled with poison that infected his tongue. His feet carrying him away from the damage he'd caused, trying to keep it from spreading. His own coven, his own *family* looking at him like they couldn't remember who he was anymore. Hyunjin, wreathed by moonlight and pinned beneath him, looking at him like all he wanted to do was try. And that same blasted prickle in his neck cutting it off.

What the fuck did I do.

"What am-" Jisung stumbled off the pistil, almost keeling into the dirt; his legs felt like he'd spent a month on a ship. *How long have I been out?* "What are you-"

"Slowly, slowly." Irene strode forward, steadying his fall. She was wearing some modernized version of a chiton- Doric, from what Jisung could remember from Minho's many lessons on art history. "You've been asleep for almost twelve hours. Combine that with oversea portaling, and it's really not good for anyone's stability."

"Portaling?" A blue spark danced over the hand reached out to him; it had glimmered with spite. "That was Baekhyun." That motherfucker."

"Yes, he did say he knew you. Bit of a bite to the mention, think he told me about something with that siren too. A clingy little bug, too, but he passed the interview." Irene stepped back smiling as Jisung finally got back his bearings. "And he got you to me."

"In world would I have let *that* happen?"

"It was no kidnapping- you came on your own free will." The fight dropped out of him, slacked his limbs at his sides. Irene watched it fall with satisfaction. "You're still missing a few spots of memory, I see. A hex will do that."

For once, Jisung couldn't even make himself angry with her- the only thing he could think of was the looks on the faces of the people who'd become his home, the whispers of the words he'd said to them. *They must be so angry.* "I was horrible to them."

"You were giving them a piece of your mind. You were being honest." Irene's hand felt like a steel glove on his shoulder; it must have been the first time she tried to comfort anyone. "We owe that much to the people we care for."

But I wasn't, something inside of him protested: a voice that sounded hoarse from yelling after ages of not being heard, the only thing in this room that felt real. *I told them so many things that weren't true- I did so many things to make them hate me. I didn't mean any of it.*

But how could he tell them that now, when he didn't even know where he was? And who knew if they would even forgive him? *What*

if all that really was in my head?

If she could read his thoughts, they didn't faze her. "No matter- you'll still thank me before the day is over. Come now- you have much to learn."

The lotus, as well as the cave it was in, was called the Rebirth Center: it was where all the new recruits went to get a taste of the "Wild Hunt experience." He could only imagine what the boys would say about it: *immersive marketing*, maybe. Had they even gotten out of bed yet? *Have they even noticed I'm missing?*

Up ahead, leading him up a dirt tunnel flowering with snapdragons,* Irene was smiling like a tour guide, feeding him words that sailed right over his head. *Is this what she does with everyone she breaks down?* Made the ground beneath them a tightrope, pushed them over onto a safety mat she prepared? Just manipulative enough to be alleviating. Diabolical.

But then again, Jisung thought, as the guilt drove deeper, *I don't know if I have anything else to run back to.*

Before a curtain of vines, Irene stepped by to let him pass through. "This here is the headquarters- the home and the heart of the operation."

And holy goblincore hell.

The entire cavern was a world on its own- no, it was more than that. It was a descent into a kaleidoscope of all kinds of ecosystems meshed into one. Everything was lit up with a starry sky of fireflies and woodcrafted Eid lanterns, green and growing; the floor was carpeted with lush grass, walls covered in Virginia creepers. If Jisung could have seen the ceiling beyond the opaque white haze of fog, he might have seen where they ended. Instead, he could settle for skyscraper-high kapok and redwood trees with tufts of blue hydrangea and poppies blooming around the strangler figs, garlands of purple jasmine and pink mandevilla hanging from the ceilings with

stripes of Virginia creepers chasing after. Plantlife was everywhere he looked- penstemon, fireweed, snow Gentians, Northern blue flag, clusters of every breed of mushroom known to man. It was almost too much.

"Everything here is home grown and natural," said Irene, leading him down the conveniently placed stone steps. "Sure, there's magic used for tweaking now and then, but no manmade tools are used to enhance anything."

Jisung skimmed the petals of a Stargazer lily in amazement as he followed her down. "How did you do all this?"

"It wasn't all on my own, I had some help." She gestured at the ground level, where he could see just what she was talking about.

Never in his life had he seen so many nature monsters in the flesh. But there they were- two acalicas mingling with the birds of paradise, a trio of hipster-looking nymphs vining up the highest branch of a kapok tree with drinks in their hands, drinks they had gotten from the bartending golem in the alcove. Hell, even the band in the center amphitheater playing some weirdly catchy bardcore version of The Real Slim Shady was made up entirely of gnomes. The cavern was churning with them, their laughter, their energy, the feel of their magic.

Just as it clicked, Irene confirmed it for him. "The members help diversify the habitat- on their own free will, of course. It's always nice when beings who come from different backgrounds bring what's home to them to you."

Looking around, it didn't look like it bothered anyone. The entire area looked the way any good party did: full of happy, blissful faces that couldn't imagine the night ever ending. *Does it ever end?*

"It's taken a few couple decades of hard work, but I've finally managed to make it happen," said Irene airily, looking over her domain. "Looks almost too good to be true, doesn't it?"

Not even almost. Jisung ran his eyes over the overwhelming green, the out-of-place flowers, the bubbling streams that filtered through the cracks by waterfall. It was a mockery of the dream that the boogeyman had given him, all those weeks ago. *The shadows cover up all that is flawed- the light chooses where it touches.* Even with all the beauty and revelry, there was too much of it. Too much mystery, too much darkness, too much of the feeling that he should run. *But where?*

He felt a sudden pang of longing for the forest of the Fortunate Isles, the plum blossoms and morning finches and warm summer air that Louisiana never lost. *A real forest- not this stage set.*

But before Jisung could protest, they were in the throes of the party, a drink was in his hand, and the fray swallowed him up.

The forest churned and swayed with a modern melody made medieval, flowers glittering like jewels scattered about the wood. Laughter emanated from beings with chlorophyll in their veins, hair the color of their birth plants, eyes just like his. But he couldn't feel the kindred spirit moment. For the first time, Jisung couldn't lose himself in the revelry. With Irene's hand on his shoulder, guiding him place to place, he couldn't feel like anything but a fish on a hook, still being dragged around.

"And you came with me right out of Arizona, didn't you, Bonnie?" Irene was saying to the meliai across from them.

"Yup," Bonnie answered cheerfully. There were spiny star blossoms blooming from her spiky Bantu knots. "Left my whole grove."

"Your whole *grove*?" Jisung repeated incredulously. "Not even with a second thought?"

"It was all going to dry up anyway- what else was a dessert gonna do?" Irene laughed, and Bonnie laughed with her. "Well, there was that Emerson scholarship that had me doubting, but why sit at a desk all day when I can be here?"

Irene said something else, something shouted over the music, and Jisung followed the sway of the party farther into the trees, shaking his head from the tendrils of fog that had begun to surround it. *I can see why I've been trying to avoid this place for so long.*

He eventually found another group- a pack of Missouri everglade nymphs all dressed in the same vintage punk thrift store haul, lounging on a grassy knoll surrounded by completely unironic mushroom clumps.

"Oh, you'll *love* it here," crooned the ringleader when he told him of his dilemma, limpwristing his clove cigarette. "The kombucha's grown fresh."

"And the music never stops," added one.

"*And* the rules of time don't apply to anything," added another.

Jisung didn't know if it was the music or the smoke clouding his ears. "You mean guys haven't gone outside in thirty-seven years?"

A guy in an oversized aviator jacket hooted. "Are you kidding? I haven't seen the sun since '86 and I feel great!"

A girl with wicked shoulder spikes whapped him in the face. "Shut up, *Kyle*, everyone knows the sun burned out in '77."

The group bickered, laughing between their words, like some old fashioned sitcom scene. Jisung felt the ground tilt under his feet again, leaning him away from the grassy knoll. *They aren't even curious*, he realized. There were dozens, thousands among them from different years, different decades, all crammed into this cavern. *They don't even care.*

He brought his drink to his lips- *something* had to help clear his head -when a hand slapped it to the ground.

"Don't do it!"

Corpselike fingers wrapped around his wrist, jerked him into the shadows. When his eyes adjusted to the lack of light, he found the person on the other end- a rose nymph, long since gnarled, eyes the green of withered thorns, hair a bruised red pixie.

“Eat or drink anything, and it binds you to this place,” they hissed, their voice a deadly barb. “Even if you find the exit, she won’t let you leave.”

Their hand seared a burning cold against his skin; pale couldn’t even begin to describe its color, so white it was almost gray, as if the bone had already made its way through. “You mean Irene?”

“She brings the most powerful here.” The rose nymph’s voice was a rusted rasp, as if it hadn’t been used in centuries. “Ones with swamps, gardens, meadows, whole forests. Only they can give her the fuel she needs.”

What the Hades’ underworld garden fuck. “Fuel?”

“It’s the plants they bring, the life they have, it’s what she *feeds on*. How do you think she’s lasted so long without a birth tree? Look.” Their second hand pointed out at the wildwood, at the trees. “Why do you think there’s so many flowers on the ground, in the trees?” Their voice rose in an eerie crescendo as Jisung’s stomach dropped. “They died trying to escape, trying to dig and climb and claw their way out. They were too awake, too awake.”

Jisung staggered to his feet, suddenly and startlingly sober, the room spinning color all around, music distorting in his ears.

“The members help diversify the habitat- on their own free will, of course.”

She’d fed him a line on a silver spoon, and he’d bought it without a second thought. *And I’m just like them*, he thought. *Too awake, too awake.*

A zap to the nape of his neck jolted the thought out of him, and he clapped a hand over it on what had become instinct. Behind him, the rose nymph's gaunt face had filled with terror, with despair.

"The *adze*," they murmured. "There is still hope for you. Find your way out. Go, go!"

But before he could follow them into the dark and scream, *How?* Irene appeared before him.

"There you are," she said, arms crossed chidingly. "I thought I'd lost you for a minute."

"Uh." Jisung stepped in front of the space where the rose nymph had been, choked down his fear and the information he'd learned just moments ago. "I found a new huddle. Evergladers. Nice crowd."

"Ah, yes. Very relaxed- ought to pull some of the strings you've wound so tight."

So high off the fumes they can't even see themselves fading. Jisung cleared his throat, forcing down the knot inside of it. "And, where. Where'd you find them?"

"One of my conquests in Florida. Never making my way down *there* again, but I did get some worthy finds." In the light of the debauchery, draped in flowing white fabric, she looked every inch like the immortal she was: living off stolen lives, feeding off of stolen power, having rejected the bounty she was given in her oasis of death. "They didn't slip you anything, did they? You look absolutely ghastly."

"I'm fine." Except good fucking God, he wasn't. His heart was beating so fast it might jump like a skipping stone right out from his ribs. His ears were ringing and there was no other sound to distract himself with. His legs were wobbling on a motionless ground- the same legs that had walked him into a prison with no escape on

nothing but the rash whim that there was no other option. *How am I going to get out of this on my own?*

Another zap short-circuited the thought from his brain; he tried to grasp for it again, but found thin air.

Irene approached him, his skin crawling as she placed another patronizing hand on his shoulder. "Don't think about what was," she told him earnestly. "You burned your bridges to be here with us, where you belong, and you will never have to leave. Welcome to your new home."

After pacing the fields for what felt like ages, salamander Bambam finally shot up out of the ocean.

The covens shot to attention immediately, running downhill to intercept him as he shook the water droplets off his scales.

"You find anything?" asked Mark.

Rippling into human form, Bambam shook his head. "Nothing but kelp for miles all around." Groans. "Hey, at least it wasn't a corpse!"

"It's been two *hours* since we realized Jisung was gone," Changbin grumbled. "We should be off this island and searching the whole state of Louisiana for him."

"Which we'll do once Jackson and Jaebum get the boats ready," Minho reminded him. "If there's any clues worth finding that were missed before, we can search for them now."

"What good is that?" Jeongin complained. "He could be anywhere by now!"

"But he isn't gone." The djinn lifted the flowerpot that they'd put Jisung's discarded forget-me-not in. Despite being slightly crumpled from Hyunjin's grasp, the colors were still vibrant, petals hanging on,

stem standing straight. "As long as this thing doesn't wilt again on its own, we can be sure of that much."

"I don't know about that," Chan murmured, scrolling through his phone. "Jamie's been sending some pretty alarming messages."

In the pictures she'd sent, all three were of Jisung's garden- shaky images of drooping azaleas*, shriveling gladioli*, even the lotus flowers in his pond sinking below their lily pads. Strangely enough, where some were dying, others were thriving- videos of yellow roses* blooming into brambles, lily of the valley* climbing through the roof while periwinkles spread over the ground.* Accompanying them were rapid texts of *what the fuck is happening to you guys???*

Felix grimaced. "We'd better get going fast."

As if that was all it took, Jackson came soaring out above the forest treetops. "Hey, guys! The boats are ready!"

"Is there, like, a good luck charm granted to you every day that gives you the power to do that?" asked Seungmin.

"It's a theory worth having," Felix whispered back.

They took off through a shortcut in the forest, just a few ways away from the clearing. After handing Bambam a beach towel, Jinyoung spotted the opening to fill the space at his brother's side, where they lagged behind in the group. For the past three hours, he'd been setting a record for refusing to look him in the eye.

"Hey."

"Jinyoung, I'm fine."

"You know I won't judge you, if anything happened-"

"If you *didn't*, then you'd leave me alone," Hyunjin hissed. "I don't need you worrying about me at a time like this."

The two of them had stopped fully, letting everyone else head onwards through the paper birches. Jinyoung waited for his younger brother to tilt his head up, finally face him.

"I'm not the only one who is," said Jinyoung. "You know that."

"You're just the only one who shows it."

"Well, someone ought to. Especially after what you told me yesterday." Hyunjin gritted his teeth, cast his gaze to the dirt. "You told him last night, didn't you?" He didn't reply; it was good as a yes. "Jin, you can't keep beating yourself up about it. It wasn't your fault."

"You don't know that."

"You said it wasn't like him, and I believe you. Even if you hadn't, judging from what I know, he wouldn't just-"

"But what if he *would*?" Something frantic had slipped into his tone, the worries that had been gnawing at him all morning. "I mean, Jisung, I- I know he's always been anxious, worrying about little things. What if I set him off? What if I pushed him past some kind of breaking point?"

"Hyunjin, you didn't fully *know* there was something up with him. We don't even know now!"

"But I could have been a *reason*." A hairline fracture, splintered in the porcelain of his voice. "Everything I've done in the past without seeing how it affected him. What if it wasn't some curse- what if it was just another side of him?"

Jinyoung, standing before his own brother's breaking heart, had only just begun to find the remedying words when Yugyeom shouted, "What the *fuck*?"

Naturally, when a member of anyone's uniquely batbrained coven felt the need to yell an obscenity into the sky, one had to run and check

it out.

When Hyunjin and Jinyoung reached the crisis zone of the clearing with the rest of their huddled crew, Minho and Yugyeom were already racing into the bushes after a shadowy black-clothed figure cursing their way through the woods.

"What happened?" Hyunjin whispered.

"Honestly, I missed it," Youngjae whispered back. "We were just walking, and then Minho saw someone portal in through the trees, and he and Yugie took off running."

"He does have that crazy periphery vision," Changbin commented.

"So..." Jinyoung hummed, watching them zigzag back and forth after their target. "Should we help them?"

"Nah, they got this," Felix assured him. "I'm here for the Scooby Doo villain bit where they drag him out red-handed for everyone to see."

For the second time that day, the angel's prophecy came true: Minho and Yugyeom returned kicking their way through the bushes, arm in arm with the culprit they'd successfully wrangled into submission.

"When I got the feeling someone was following us," Minho grunted, voice strained with effort, "I didn't think it was going to be someone I actually *recognized*."

They dumped them mercilessly out onto the ground, head bowed as they spat out blades of grass, muttering unintelligible curses. Finally, reluctantly letting go of the last shred of their mystery, they looked up.

"Oh, come *on*," Chan groaned with the rest of them.

"Ewww," jeered Felix. Jeongin quite literally gagged into the bushes.

"What is it?" asked Changbin, shoving his way to the front of the huddle. "Get out of the way, I can't see!" When he did get to, it certainly didn't seem to please him. "Oh. What the fuck."

"Baekhyun?" Hyunjin sputtered incredulously.

The patupaiarehe sniffed sullenly at their disgust. "Nice to see you too, Jin."

Seungmin turned away, hands in the air out of the utmost indifference. "I knew it, I knew it. I knew he was going to come find us, but did anyone listen to me? *Noooooo.*"

"Sorry, *how* do you guys know him?" Jinyoung butted in.

He watched in bewilderment as all fingers pointed to Hyunjin, who brushed it off impatiently. "It's complicated," he told him, quickly fixing his attention to Baekhyun. "Look, I don't know how ditching you in the middle of a circus riot didn't end things properly enough for you, but at the moment we really don't have time to-"

"Oh, quit flattering yourself," Baekhyun seethed. "I'm not here because of you- I'm here because of the guy you ditched me for."

"Oop," peeped Bambam.

Seungmin spun on his heel back for the drama. "Wait a minute."

Chan clapped a hand over Bambam's mouth, pointed the other in a finger gun at the disruptor. "Go back to that last bit?"

Baekhyun looked around at the circle he'd found himself in: a djinn and a poltergeist guarding the back, Jackson and Jaebum wings out settled in trees up above, and the other halves of two covens fencing off the front, lead by the siren in the center, curiosity slowly building on his expression.

"Yeah, Baekhyun," he said ominously. "What about him?"

It seemed to occur to Baekhyun, right there and then, just how deep in the shit he'd gotten. "I don't think I'll do that."

"You think you have a choice?" Minho challenged.

With the way his life was going at the moment, any option Baekhyun had of living was narrowing down pretty quick. So, doing the natural thing, he bolted for the other way.

Before he could even get three steps out, Mark thrust out a hand, summoning two branches from the nearest trees to lash out, snap around his wrists, and draw him backwards, this time suspended in the air.

"This better not be what I think it is," Mark muttered, marching right up to him and yanking down his jacket sleeve to reveal Irene's tree of life tattoo over his pulse. "Course. A fucking *Wild Hunt* boy."

For the second time that evening, Baekhyun drew up another round of groans.

"You spent forty years with Kai, who literally *robbed you* of your home," Hyunjin accused. "And even *that* couldn't make you learn?"

"Kai gave me home, gave me *stability*," Baekhyun seethed. "And Irene found me when I was a vagabond with no home. I serve her with pride!"

"Can you not even *exist* on your own?" asked Seungmin.

"The Stockholm syndrome must've really gotten bad," Jeongin mused, somewhat sympathetically.

"Says the whelps from the oversized coven."

"You whipped out your backbone and handed it to two different people as a jump rope the minute you found yourself alone," Changbin countered. "Quit acting like you still have one."

Baekhyun opened his mouth, but, apparently, he couldn't find a damn word to say to that in time to reply to Hyunjin.

"It seems like today's your lucky day," the siren said, smiling at him like he had the day they'd met. "You might actually be able to help us."

"And why would I do *that*?" Baekhyun sneered.

Chan took the siren's right side. "Well, given what you just said about Jisung-

"Whose name did not have to be said," added Jeongin.

"We think you could cut the time out of your schedule."

Baekhyun rolled his eyes, slackening in his shackles. "What happened? You were all such a tight-knit group, last I checked."

"That was before the patron of your idiot tattoo came over here and tried to tear it apart again," Minho fired back. "You sure know how to pick them."

"How dare you? Irene is a queen, a *visionary*."

Bambam cleared his throat, raised his eyebrows at Baekhyun. "No backbone?"

"Yes, yes, and for some reason, her vision included stealing our boy off to hell knows where," said Chan. "Which brings us to our point: what do you know about it?"

Now this, Baekhyun actually did have an intriguing answer to. "Stole him?"

"Well, maybe not *exact* bodysnatching thievery, but it was an easy conclusion to come to," Seungmin intervened.

"She's been tracking us ever since we arrived in Louisiana," said Felix. "Did you know that?"

"Of course she has! You guys can't hide your trail for shit."
Baekhyun's shoulders started shaking; it took them a minute to see the budding smile on his face. "*Stole* him."

"He's laughing," Yugyeom murmured distastefully. "I don't like that sound out of him."

"Neither do I," Minho responded. "What's so funny? You're quite literally tied up here- you're not in the position to laugh."

"It's just... you're saying *stole*," Baekhyun giggled, like he was laughing at a joke in his own head. "When he came on his own free will."

The whole grove went silent, went still with the implication. Even the birds went collectively mute.

Hyunjin took one innocent, ominous step forward. "What did you say?"

Felix stepped back, murmuring something like "oh, shit," into Changbin's ear. Jinyoung closed a gentle hand around his brother's arm. "Jin, stay calm."

"You were here last night?" Jaebum questioned.

"Once Irene found your coordinates, the location wasn't exactly secret," said Baekhyun languidly. "I was just sent to carry out the errand, but, wow. Was the package a sight to see."

"Anyone else feel like using him as a cliff-diving dummy?" asked Bambam.

"Tears in his eyes, clothes in disarray," Baekhyun went on, still wearing that blissfully smug grin. "As loyal as you claim to be to each

other, not one of you arrived in time. Perhaps you even chased him away."

"What does that mean?" Chan demanded.

"Oh, don't act so *dense*." The patupaiarehe's voice lurched into a serrated edge, somewhere between anger and hysteria. "It's a lovely act you've got going- pretend you're the happy family, skipping through adventure while you roll with the punches, yet the minute something's actually wrong, you push it out. Forget it was ever there." Baekhyun's head tilted up, as if listening for something. "Although there was one moment."

"The hell are you talking about?" Minho interrogated darkly. Hyunjin's hands were shaking into fists, face white as the passing clouds.

"The spriggan ran through midnight, as if to escape the downfall of the earth below," Baekhyun recited into the sky, a poem from his own lunacy. "He still smelled of smoke from the last bridge he'd burned- on his skin were the ashes, tainting his face, his hands, his lips." His eyes dropped, honed in on Hyunjin as their sole target. "He wasn't running from them- he was running from you."

"Yup, he's dead," Changbin whispered back to Felix.

"Take that back," Hyunjin ordered shakily, voice more breath than growl.

"And deny you of the truth? You know it. They know it." His grin widened at the glee of it. "Now I finally have it confirmed." His grin widened at the glee of it.

"Was he this unhinged when you guys met him?" Youngjae asked Seungmin.

"Y'know, I would say this is another problem we can pin on Irene," Seungmin replied under his breath, watching Hyunjin yank away from Jinyoung's grasp. "But it might go a little deeper than that."

"Tell me where he is." Voice shaking like an upcoming earthquake, Hyunjin held his ground. *"Tell me!"*

"There it is," Baekhyun crooned, drinking in his desperation like nectar. "How does it feel to have the pained turned on *you*?"

"Just *listen* to yourself. You know you're of no worth to her- why do you do this?"

"There was one thing Irene promised when she sent me on this job. Not money, not recognition. *Revenge.*"

"Jin, get away from him," Chan called from behind. "He isn't worth it."

But Hyunjin was past listening. Seething, he charged for him. "You're fucking *insane*-"

"You think I don't know what he is to you?" Baekhyun rasped madly, stopping him like a slap across the face. "He's what you've been trying not to think about for *years*. He's *everything*. And if you think I'm going to give that to you, you're *wrong*."

"Jin," Jinyoung tried again, urging his brother backwards with a trembling tone and a careful hand on his shoulder. "Just let it slide."

Hyunjin dodged him with the slightest lean of movement; he hadn't even heard the caution. A mask of ice had slipped over his features, the Pacific frozen over. His ear was tilted towards the sky, picking a tune out of the crashing waves in the distance.

Quietly, as if through a funeral hymn, his voice emerged in a gravelly, haunting whisper.

*"Bite my tongue, bide my time,"** he sang, creeping forward, away from the covens. *"Wearing a warning sign,"*

"Wait till the world is mine,"

Stray Kids watched with bated breath as his hands turned out at his sides, opened like a blooming lotus.

Through, *"Visions I vandalize,"* the water in the pond rose in a gradual arc with his arms, taller and taller into *"Cold in my kingdom size,"* until the shadow was leering over all of them, and Baekhyun finally looked up when it was too late to catch his breath. *"Fell for these ocean eyes."*

"Hyunjin," Minho started, voice cut off by both hesitation and fear, eyes on the wave that had taken place of the sky.

But when it descended, it saved its wrath only for Baekhyun.

Hyunjin's voice rumbled into *"You should see me in a crown,"* and he curved the crash into a sphere around him, a spinning globe of water that seized Baekhyun's body with cold, made his eyes bulge and his scream lock tightly in his throat. As the siren lined out with, *"I'm gonna run this nothing town,"* he shifted his hands to shrink the sphere smaller, drive the current faster, harder, stronger, perfecting the whirlpool with its one victim inside. *"Watch me make them bow one by, one by, one,"*

"Hyunjin, stop," Jeongin pleaded, but his attempt was drowned out by the noise.

Baekhyun didn't even make it through the first half of the chorus before his lips parted in an inevitable gasp, water filling his lungs instead of air. *"You should see me in a crown."* His hands pulled at their restraints, body twitched in panic. Even as he choked, gagged on the absence of oxygen, Hyunjin didn't stop. He closed the prison smaller, snarled through the lyrics at a victim who couldn't talk back. *"Your silence is my favorite sound."*

"Watch me make them bow one by, one by, one,"

"One by, one by-"

"That's *enough!*" Jinyoung shouted, shoving his brother backwards, forcing him to drop the pond back into its hollow, to let Baekhyun go. "We're not gonna get any closer to finding Jisung if the guy can't talk."

Hyunjin screwed his mouth shut, fuming as Chan and Minho hauled him back. Mark released Baekhyun's branches, let him fall to the ground, cough and retch clawing at the dirt as he breathed greedily the air he'd been deprived of.

"Now that your manners have been polished off," began Jinyoung after a moment of consideration. "Are you ready to talk now?"

Soaking wet and breathing hard, Baekhyun's red-veined eyes scanned their faces with reborn, somehow deeper hatred. If he'd wanted revenge before, he was ready to destroy the whole island now. Perhaps he would have, had he been able to summon a spark in defense.

"Irene sent me out at midnight," he gritted out, kneeling with his head bowed low. "She knew no one else would be around- she'd been watching you guys for three days. And..." Baekhyun swallowed, probably forcing back his last shred of self preservation. "That was when the hex wore off."

Jeongin stifled a breath. Minho and Chan exchanged solemn looks. "What hex?" the vampire asked.

The hex, as Baekhyun revealed to them, was born from an ancient trickster bug called an adze. Irene collected them from a faraway source in Ghana; they were used in black magic when modern methods wouldn't cut it. The creature would exert control over the host by linking itself to the nervous system, honing in on their emotional weakpoints.

"The thing feeds on negative emotions," Baekhyun explained, splitting a bitter glance at Jinyoung's glare. "Forces anything else into a back burner, takes over their headspace. Whenever the

wearer feels anxiety, anger, confusion, fear, lust, anything- it consumes them. It takes the place of every instinct they have. Over time, it becomes the only thing they can resort to feeling."

"That's why he was acting so weird," Changbin realized.

"Void Jisung," Felix murmured. Seungmin punched his arm. "Ow!"

"Get that Teen Wolf bullshit out of here." They peeked at Hyunjin, who had started coming back to earth after his Billie Eilish-induced red haze. "We're gonna have to save it for later."

"So its effects wear off after a day," ruminated Youngjae. "Does that mean Jisung's back to normal now?"

"Wouldn't you like to believe that?" With a twitch of Mark's grimace, a tree branch snapped out and smacked Baekhyun's head. "Yes, the negativity lessens, but while the wearer still has it on, the adze still feeds. It'll resort to negative emotions solely, whether the host is feeling them or not. If worn long enough, they'll just become a happy little shell of ignorance. Works pretty well."

"Is this what she's been doing to everyone she has her eye on?" asked Mark.

"Not everyone- in exchange for their loyalty, informants like me are off the hook; she needs someone to tell her about the goings on of the world," replied Baekhyun. "But the ecosystem owners are her real targets."

Informants, according to Baekhyun, were lower level staffers, like the dryads on Holly Beach, only left behind to report back to Irene the things she needed to know. Ecosystems owners were beings in charge of keeping entire habitats alive- golems, faeries, spriggans like Irene. Even as a former, Jisung still had power- and such a thing couldn't be wasted.

"She's been doing it since the 70's," Baekhyun continued, "It won't always be personal, but she'll wait until they can't take anymore- until they come to her. She'll uproot them from their homes and take them to her hideout, where they're kept in eternal revelry to keep their minds off their ecosystems. Some of them'll try to escape, but none of them have. And while they're down there, she siphons the life out of their ecosystems- as the owner of the adzes, they're connected to her. Sometimes we informants will have to go out and steal from the habitats, but for the most part, the work does itself." At their horrified expressions, Baekhyun grinned. "I know. Ingenious, right?"

"We gotta find him," Minho murmured. "We have to get him out." Quickly, he fixed his attention back on Baekhyun. "This hideout of hers. Where can we find it?"

"It's on an island somewhere," Baekhyun responded blithely. "But where, I can't say."

The covens went silent. Minho nodded at Jinyoung, who cleared his throat. In seconds, he'd changed into leviathan form, coiled around Baekhyun and glowering in his face, fangs out and pit black eyes barbarous, all before the patupaiarehe could even flinch.

"... I hate you guys."

After prodding Baekhyun in the right direction, he lead them into the grove beyond the clearing. Rubbing his palms together, the flint sparked a white flame, and when set into the ground, it opened up into a black void of a portal, leading to hell only knew where.

"You have until noon before he's initiated," Baekhyun said. "After that, he's out of your hands."

Stray Kids and Got7 met each others' eyes, just to see if they were in agreement, and nodded back to him. "We can make that work," Chan answered.

As it turned out, wandering through a party did help nudge one away from the brink of insanity.

Though he didn't drink a drop (nor did he accept any of the hand-rolled 'party favors' passed around by the evergladers), there was something inviting about the environment, something misty and flannel-soft that urged his guard down, didn't make it feel so bad. Every time he felt some kind of hesitation, some flicker of caution, a shock went through his nerves, untangling them again, a feeling like static in his brain as he ventured farther in.

Irene cheered him on, the Wild Hunt welcomed him with a roar, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd been greeted with such enthusiasm. *As if they've been saving it just for me.*

Maybe it was the feeling of being half asleep that made it so comfortable, as if he were merely dreaming. It felt like eons ago that he'd felt uncomfortable at arriving- could have been a millennia, could have been a minute. What had that rose nymph been saying about that adze? Perhaps he'd dreamed them up too.

He'd think about the others, of course- muses, fleeting thoughts, wondering where they were. They'd love a place like this- Felix would definitely have something to say about the music. Minho and Chan would take over the dance floor like they always did, Jeongin would race Seungmin to the top of that kapok, Changbin would get into a fight with that mountain gnome (whether it was a dance battle or an actual tussle would vary) and-

His mind always glitched out before he could go any further. Always, Jisung was left with the feverish aftermath of the idea, a mere concept of an image that drove a pinprick through his numbed heart. They stayed with him for a flash, just a blink of a second before they left, but like a bloodstain to pearl silk, they stayed: Hyunjin stealing a drink from under the bartender's nose, dancing in his own pocket of space, taking the place of the band with his own song, his own voice. *It always ends with him.*

It was those moments where the colors dimmed, the lyrics blurred together, and the ground swayed a little under his feet. *Wait*, a little voice peeped, familiar and foreign at the same time. *Are you sure this is right?*

But then the song would crossfade into another crowd pleaser, the lights would change color, the jolt would return- just to remind him that he had nothing to worry about.

Jisung had been so afraid when Irene called this place his new home. Now, he could feel himself beginning to believe her.

Contrary to popular belief- "You're really leaving while the dance circle is just now starting?" sputtered Flynn - Jisung hadn't slunk off the floor to bring down the party. There was only so much one could take of the crushing of their personal boundaries before it finally crossed the line. *One could say I'm becoming a flower myself, planted by the wall.* Close enough to see the action, far enough to be apart from it. Though he was pretty sure he was the only one lounging right next to the bar and not drinking anything.

Be that as it may, Jisung could make all The Perks of Being a Wallflower puns he wanted to console himself.

The song playing now was a misty cover of Somebody That I Used To Know; the lead singer's voice seemed less suited for a rave garden than a smoky village tavern as she sang, *"Now and then I think of when we were together."* From far away, the whole scene looked like an illustration- lurid, outlandish, definitely beautiful. A kaleidoscope show of lights playing over beings of different decades showing off to each other how they moved, the dances they'd learned in their time aboveground. Drinks were downed through linked arms and toasted into the treetops, where the climbers who'd decided they liked the aerial view better returned the gesture. The lost souls in the form of flowers seemed to wither and glow with every change of tempo and tune, as if trying to sing along. Irene twirled in the center, hair loose and flying, for once carefree. *"Like when you said you felt so happy you could die."*

Maybe this is the Irene her followers see, Jisung thought, though it didn't sit right with him. Irene was less of a coin than a multisided dice- one flip could introduce a dimension you'd never seen before.

"Told myself that you were right for me,"

"But felt so lonely in your company,"

"You look rather tragic standing all alone against the wall."

The voice next to him pulled him up short. Looking over his shoulder, Hendery was reclined next to him, swirling his drink with the rim of the cup, watching the party with bored engrossment. "I'm sure the same could be said about you."

"Alas, if I weren't beat to the punch." He took a drink, grimaced, and threw it aside. When he glanced at Jisung, it was with considerably more interest. "What brought you to the sidelines?"

"Just felt like I needed a break. Kind of nice to watch it all, you know?" Hendery shrugged. "What about you?"

"Never cared for dancing, not really my thing. Drinks are nice, and, well, like you said, it is sort of fun to see people make fools of themselves."

Not really what I meant, Jisung thought. For the sake of peace, he bit it back. "For one of Irene's main supporters, you don't seem thrilled with her methods."

"It's more to keep the patrons distracted than anything. To keep them from getting homesick for what they signed off." A smirk touched the corner of his mouth. "From what I saw, it seemed to be working just fine on you."

"Really?" He scoffed. "Well, I mean- I didn't notice."

"It wasn't bad. You seem semi-conscious, which probably added to it. But, I don't know. It was nice."

Never in the years Jisung had spent dodging Irene's interceptions had Hendery ever expressed interest in holding a conversation with him, much less one that was actually pleasant. But for some reason, this didn't feel as suspicious as it should have. "Well, I'm glad to have won your approval."

Hendery laughed; it was friendly, ordinary, for the first time hearing it. Jisung started to smile back.

"Then what's wrong?"

And there it was: another pesky jolt in his system. Static shock and déjà vu, like someone had asked him that before. "What?"

"You're not still thinking about them, are you?"

By them, he could have only meant his coven. *Which I shouldn't be thinking of them as, now that I'm here.* "I've only been gone a day- of course I am."

"Then that's your first problem- they're the reason you left, the ones who pushed you out. They don't deserve room in your head."

Everyone keeps saying that, but- "That's not exactly keeping them out of it at the moment."

After a moment of deliberation, Hendery pushed off the wall in front of him, held out a surprisingly chivalrous hand. "I can help with that."

For a blank, bizarre moment, Jisung couldn't do anything but stare. Not even five minutes after saying dancing wasn't his thing, here this guy was offering to spin him around to the chorus of Gotye's one hit wonder. *Will anything in this place ever make sense?*

He was already reaching out to take it, body acting before mind, when another memory transposed over the moment, another voice, another boy.

"Just follow my lead."

Pain seared through his head like wildfire, knocking him backwards like he'd been shoved. His vision fractured: before him was Hendery, coming to help him up with more curiosity than concern, and beyond that was Irene's party thriving in brilliant, garishly colored darkness. The singer's voice warped into, *"But you didn't have to cut me off,"* some terrible cross between a crooning whale and something a sailor reached out to during a storm- a siren's song.

Siren-

The pain doubled back in a new wave, throbbing against his skull, like a mental hangover of everything he'd ever experienced in his life. Jisung couldn't suppress the groan that shuddered out of him, buckled his knees and made him topple sideways into the nearest object- another oversized fly agaric mushroom, of all goddamn things. Hendery murmured something about withdrawals before he left his periphery for more stable action.

Jisung tried to push himself up, focus on something- the music, the flowers, the too green grass, anything that would help him get a grip, but in his mind, all he could see was red, red lights fading magenta, the whiskey warm scent of the Cloak and Dagger, Hyunjin's face drifting in and out of focus to the discordant strums of an acoustic guitar, blue eyes cutting through the erratic mirage. Under the felt of the mushroom cap, he could feel the heat of his skin like lava, felt the motion of the music moving through them in the beat of the sound through the dirt. If he closed his eyes, he was close to him again, keeping them both upright at a 45 degree angle, holding his breath at the heartbeat pounding against his, staring into Hyunjin's ocean eyes. It was a dream, a moment from a lifetime ago. It was the only thing about this place that felt real.

The song ended midverse, just as Jisung was pushing himself to his feet. A squeal of microphone feedback took over the noise.

"Members of the Wild Hunt, lend me your ears," Irene's voice bellowed, carrying out from the highest point of the cavern- the other end of the amphitheater. She stood at the foot of her purple orchid*

throne, eyes slicing through the revelry to land on him. "It is time for the initiation of our longest awaited member: my fellow spriggan, Han Jisung."

Meanwhile, the extraction team had already moved into position.

Just to be on the safe side, they'd had Baekhyun confirm three consecutive times that yes, he had portaled them to the right place, not some random island halfway across the globe where he'd dip and leave them to die.

"You guys aren't the only ones who know about encrypting your hideouts," Baekhyun grumbled. "Irene's got more than a few tricks up her sleeve."

"Well, be that as it may, she didn't learn to safeguard herself against ours," said Hyunjin, sizing up the gnarled mountain. "Thanks for your help, Baekhyun, but we'll take it from here."

"Wha- but- but you need me!"

"When you wake up, I want you to name one time anyone's ever told you that. Changbin, would you do the honors?"

Already grinning, Changbin cracked his knuckles ripe with dark energy and sent one hard hit right into the patupaiarehe's temple, knocking him out cold.

"We love the takeover of intrusive thoughts, but he did have a point," interrupted Minhø. "If there's an entrance to this thing, I'm not seeing it."

"That's where it's easy- just look at the structure." Hyunjin gestured for them all to step back, they took it in: a giant stone cornucopia climbing up a steep cliff bluff, overgrown with vines and flowers, the end curling down like a Fibonacci shell. Knocking on the stone, he found it hollow inside. "There's bound to be an entrance at the end."

Once they'd circled the island, it was Jackson who whistled for everyone to gather around.

"Still shivering the timbers out of every hidden treasure," he proclaimed proudly, brushing a mess of Virginia creepers and wild rose brambles aside to reveal a rabbit hole-esque tunnel into a deeper level.

Jeongin and Felix gasped with delight, locked eyes with Yugyeom and Bambam, whose twin smug smiles were swiped off their faces as Jaebum told them to quit dillydallying, they had a spriggan to save. Grumbling under their breath, they followed their covens down the tunnel.

Still, it didn't stop them from singing "*secret tunnel~*" on the way down. Which meant both sets of coven parents still had to tell them to shut up.

The tunnel lead to one small little alcove room with an oversized lotus growing in the center. Seated on a stool by the entrance was a satyr child who seemed to realize much too late that he was outnumbered. He only got through the first few notes of Pound The Alarm on his lute before Mark summoned a root to the nape of his neck; he caught the kid before he fell on his face.

"Baekhyun was right," the leshy murmured. In his hand was a beetle-sized firefly, which glowed red instead of yellow. "We should get Irene on child abuse for this."

Filing down the tunnel (Mark humming in disapproval about the snapdragons) Chan halted them at the last minute. Through the curtain of flowers, it was easy to hear Irene's voice booming through open space, carrying out a speech.

He moved a hand through the nearest shadow. "Everyone hang on," he whispered, and hands were grabbed down the line as they crept into the dark.

The gang emerged behind a clump of way too big mushrooms, hidden from Irene's line of sight, but still close enough to make out her figure standing atop the beginning of a landslide before an ecological shitshow of plants and nature monsters.

"As brothers and sisters of the earth, we gather under a roof that was made by no man," Irene bellowed, "but by the magic of our own lifeblood!"

"Y'know, I can see how this took off in the 70's," Yugyeom mused.

"And now we allow another one to make his home beneath it." Stretching out her hand, she beckoned to the amphitheater below. "Jisung, you may now come forward."

The crowd shifted; all they could recognize was a glimpse of blue hair and black denim, but the sight of his profile still made Hyunjin catch his breath. Felix squeezed his hand in comfort.

"We got a plan?" Bambam asked.

Hyunjin's gaze tracked the room, the artist in him already mapping out a blueprint of drop spots in the negative space. "We stay in the darkness," he responded lowly. "Spread out to every angle we can find. Fifteen isn't enough to cover this whole cavern, but it can make a perimeter." He glanced at his team to make sure they were following. "If you see a moment to break, wait until we've all got him in sight. That's a move we make together, alright?"

Nods of agreement from the squad. Chan backed them towards the shadows. "Let's get our guy."

Under the spotlight of a couple hundred thousand trained firefiles, Jisung started his ascent up the stairs to where Irene was waiting. The crowd had parted like a red carpet- even the band had split through the middle to let him cross. Yet, even with the words of encouragement that stuck to him as he passed, the smiles in his peripheral vision, every step felt like a rebellion. Out of the hundreds

of monsters egging him on, he could still feel the dagger gaze of the rose nymph pinned on his back, outlining another gruesome prophecy.

Once you do this, there won't be any fruit or poison to spit out, some murmur that sounded like caution whispered to his mind. *It'll be a contract signed with your own blood, your life in her hands.* Didn't he still have something worth giving up?

Just as the beginning of another shock made his body tense, he heard the rustling.

Jisung stopped halfway up- more rustling, from treetops, flower bushes, even the vines along the ceiling. Irene's outstretched hand faltered in its poise, her waiting eyes looking away from him. Behind him, the audience of monsters were glancing around too, muttering confusion to one another.

A punch echoed in the distance. Then another.

And the emerald green dragon came bursting through the trees roaring at full speed.

Jisung's first thought was how the hell did Jaebum get a running start in as every being in the room started screaming, the second he didn't have time to finish as the rest of the agitators came storming in: Jackson wings out, dropping fox form Jeongin like a pipe bomb into the fray, Changbin throwing the golem right over the bar, Minho dropping from a kapok tree with a ring of stars swirling around him, and a gray ghost with Yugyeom's laugh cycloning madly around the forest.

Even with his brain in the form of a fog machine, Jisung could feel himself start to smile. *Now it's a party.*

Suddenly two vines of purple orchids lashed around his wrists. Irene was marching furiously down the stairs, face twisted in a glowering

sneer; her patience had officially hit its limit. "You aren't going *anywhere*-"

"For the *ecosystem*!" Mark's yell resounded, making an opening for the rest of his body as it slingshotted itself in a flying dropkick that blasted her right off the staircase.

Jisung could have stood there watching all of it unfold had he not caught the menacing crunch of boots landing in the dirt behind him. Flinching around, he unraveled the orchids around his wrists and prepared to attack.

Chan held his hands up in easy surrender, chuckling his dimples into existence. "Whoa, there," he said. "Didn't mean to make you jump."

And before he could even drop the vines, the vampire reached behind his neck and *yanked*- startling the rest of Jisung's brain into existence.

"*Holy*-" Jisung staggered back, tripping on his heels into memories. "What the hell was-" With every one he gained, he remembered what he hadn't been able to focus on before: just *why* he'd left his coven for Irene's menagerie. "Oh, shit, Chan, I'm so sorry-"

"Hey. Enough of that. You're forgiven." The look in those genuine, shadow black eyes promised him he meant it. "Now come on. Let's get you some fresh air."

With a fully fleshed-out conscience, there was a lot once could appreciate about a good fight scene. For starters, the soundtrack-Bambam had requested the petrified band play something snappy, so they'd swung into an archaic rendition of Pumped Up Kicks. The natural lighting crew had mixed up their cue, so they commenced with the rainbow colored cupid beams saved for what Jisung assumed were special occasions. All along the sidelines, he could see their allies fighting Irene's guard dogs: Seungmin using his werewolf arms to uproot a fly agaric and discus throw it at the trio of

bardhas in his way on the right, Felix kame-hame-ha'ing a ba jiao gui into the wall on his left.

"How long did it take you guys to find me?" Jisung yelled over the noise.

"Took a good portion of the morning to scan the perimeters." Chan pulled them down in a crouch to duck a wayward boulder. "But Baekhyun was helpful." Jisung pulled a face. "Yeah, it wasn't very pleasant. But it seems like we found you in the nick of time."

They raced through the forest where the battle was at its prime; Chan jerked them into a tree shadow when anyone got too close. When he could catch those, Jisung whipped out one of his own vines from the strangler figs on the trees. *Never knew how much I'd miss the feel of my own power.*

"Shouldn't these guys be kicking our asses?" Chan asked, drawing them up short as Jeongin and Yugyeom cut through their path after a flailing group of goth leimakids. "I mean, this is kind of your turf."

"Yeah, but most of these guys are hexed out of their minds and went here to mourn Kennedy getting shot, so they're pretty harmless." A crash thundered over their heads, and Changbin fell from the high branches of a redwood with the golem running towards him. "Mostly. You know not to hurt them too bad, right?"

"Don't worry, we got the memo. Most of this is just to get you out anyway." A duo of radande dropped from the trees, brambles wielded like whips. Before they could react for themselves, a flash of stygian silver sliced through the space before them- in its place was Youngjae, reaper scythe in hand, ready to defend some more lost souls. "Youngjae! Thanks for the save!"

Youngjae tossed a grin over his shoulder. "Don't mention it!"

One of the radande shrieked in panic. "He's a communist!"

"What-"

"Peaked in the 60's!" Jisung called over Chan's shoulder.

They'd gotten closer to the center now; even with the band playing their tunes, there was someone else making their own beat against the dirt, starting their own song. A spray of water droplets dusted his skin, the contact bringing a chill down his spine.

*"I'm gonna fight 'em off,"**

"A seven nation couldn't hold me back,"

Chan stepped in to back up Youngjae, and Jisung took the chance, cutting away in the opposite direction. Branches and comets and bodies and kombuchas were flying every which way. He ignored them all, chasing the voice into the thick of the battle. *"They're gonna rip it off, taking their time right behind my back,"*

"And I'm talking to myself at night, because I can't forget,"

"Back and forth through my mind, behind a cigarette,"

He stumbled over a mandrake into the prechorus, freezing in the middle of the battlefield.

"And the message coming from my eyes says, 'Leave it alone,'"

Hyunjin was a figure of fluid chiaroscuro, red hair whipping in a wind of saltwater, snarling through a rock ballad as a one-man menace, illustrated with flowing war paint in a ring of crystalline floods. A piece of the Renaissance dropped into the underground, filling it with a hurricane.

Jisung hadn't even realized he was staring until Minho clicked his jaw shut with a finger. "He's gonna want to have a word with you."

The siren sent the rest of his hurricane loose in a rip current that blew back everyone in a seven foot radius. In the midst of it all, he

found Jisung. All at once, they were standing in the middle of that clearing again, in the middle of a war zone. Jisung's heart was going to bungee jump out of his ass.

Without taking his eyes off him, Hyunjin surged forward, reeled him in by the hand and snarled, "It's about fucking *time*."

And with that sentiment, he dragged him off.

Right over their heads, Jackson dive-bombed a Jason Momoa drow lookalike with a corkscrew kick. Jisung couldn't have possibly cared less. "Couldn't have bothered with a hello?"

Hyunjin lead them roughly through a shortcut in the trees. "I think we're a little past that now."

Chan was waiting by the dark side of the stairway. "So, even after... everything from yesterday, you were still willing to join this whole riot?"

"Little more than join," piped Chan. Jisung looked dubiously to the siren for an answer, and Hyunjin's eyes returned to his, somber as a ballad.

"It's gonna take a lot more than one day of damage to make me give up on you."

And that might have been the moment where Jisung broke down for real, lightning strike and all- if that lightning hadn't been one of Minho's comets smashing Hendery into the stairs, with the thunder taking form of Irene howling for their heads.

Turning his attention to Chan, Hyunjin said, "Get us out of here," and led Jisung into the shadows still gaping.

For a moment, the darkness enveloped them completely, then he was pulled blinking into afternoon sunlight, stepping out onto real green grass, twisting his neck to look at golden shower trees and

sycamores. When he gained his full sight back, Hyunjin was already looking around for another way out.

He's still here, the voice in his head urged- his conscience, his courage, not the hex that had been infecting his thoughts. *There's still time to make things right- it isn't all lost.*

"Hyunjin."

"What?" The siren snapped around instantly, senses on high alert. "What is it- did you see anyone?"

He's the reason you came back to your senses- tell him that. "We should talk."

Hyunjin stopped. There was a tense set to his shoulders, like he was holding his breath. "There's no time."

"We can't just pretend it didn't happen." The siren tried to start them forward again. Jisung yanked his hand out of his grip, forcing him to turn around.

Now that his eyes weren't shrouded in cavern dusk, he could see the skin under Hyunjin's eyes colored papery and purple, like he hadn't slept a wink. "This is *your* escape we're trying to pull off."

"I remember what I said- what I *did*."

"So what are you going to tell me now? That you didn't mean it?"

"You know I did. I- I just-" Jisung sighed, fumbling for the words. "That wasn't how I wanted to say it."

For one hopeful instant, it looked like Hyunjin believed him. But then, on the other side of the island: the crumbling of earth, like a pickaxe to cobblestone. His gaze clouded over again. "It wouldn't have made a difference," he muttered, and foraged on.

Jisung chased after him. "Do you know what I would have told you instead?"

"Stop, Jisung."

"If you're angry, I understand."

"That isn't it."

"Then what the hell is it?" Hyunjin tilted his head to the clouds, letting go of a deep exhale. "You pull me in, then you push me away. You're not mad, but you won't let me explain myself. Why are you going through so much to save my life if you won't even-"

"I fucking love you, okay?"

He'd turned around so fast Jisung flinched back into a sycamore. His shout rang out for miles- it could have reached the Triangle, the forests of Washington, the very mantle of the earth.

Hyunjin's tears welled up in his eyes, slipped out with the breath that choked out of his lips as he looked down in exasperation, in shame, eyes zeroed in on Jisung's pounding heartbeat.

"I love you," he whispered, taking a soft step towards him. "I'm sorry." Hyunjin's hand curled around his shoulder, set him back upright. "I know I don't deserve it, and I know I don't show it as often as I should, but I love you." His fingers ghosted lightly over Jisung's cheek, delicately, like it was all he was allowed. "So please." He dropped his hand to his collarbone. "Let me do this one thing for you."

Before Jisung could even think to ask what he meant, Jinyoung jogged into the frame. "Ready when you are, Jin."

Hyunjin sniffed hard, shoved the heels of his palms into his eyes, fixed his shoulders back like he was preparing for another song. A

new sense of dread snaked around Jisung's throat. "What're you doing?"

"She'll be here any minute. Looking for you." Hyunjin looked off in the direction of the pounding rock; voices had joined in, and the rhythm of pressure against rock had gotten heavier, louder. "Jinyoung will take you off the island, and I'll hold them off. The others will help me when they find their way out."

A sound like a dam breaking erupted from the other side, the war cries of Irene's most loyal lead by the spriggan's ferocious yell of, *"Find the runaway!"*

"Hyunjin, *no*." Jinyoung had already started taking his arm; Jisung shrugged away. "That's over half the island- they'll destroy you."

"Jisung." Hyunjin shook his head, pasted a smile on his face, raw with promise and determination and the knowledge that neither one of them would ever give up, not really. "I'll be okay. Jinyoung will take you to the Isles, and I'll come back, and without any monsters, cults, or death threats breathing down our backs, we'll talk as much we need to." He paced back, making the distance between them wider. "But first, you have to let me do this."

The mob had started running up the cliff for an ambush; they stood motionless on the halfway mark between solid ground and the hill leading up the cliff. The tree shadows flickered, a sure sign of the magic their allies were using to find their way to them. There was a whole ocean of water around them- there was no way that Hyunjin would be lacking in a weapon.

Yet that didn't take anything away from the pulverizing twist in Jisung's chest that just kept hurting. Or the strained placidity on Jinyoung's face, like he was going to lose his brother all over again.

Hyunjin faced his back to them, let the stiffness of his shoulders ease; there was no talking him out of anything now. Jinyoung started

walking first, Jisung following on senseless autopilot, only dropping his eyes to the grass when he could see nothing more.

Irene's soldiers had surrounded Hyunjin just moments after he'd said goodbye. Even with the ring of saltwater churning around him, it felt useless against the masses that faced him, their thorns sharp, vines solid, branches gnarled and ugly. Their expressions were wiped clean of evil or empathy, just puppets made to put on a show.

The siren closed his eyes as they ran for him, focused on the sounds around him, the dulcet flutes of the forest winds, carrying him back to a simpler time, something sweeter, stronger, worth fighting for: two lost souls finding each other in a midnight garden with fireflies for stars.

*"Can you hear the drums, Fernando?"**

Jisung halted, whirled around. "No fucking way."

"What?" asked Jinyoung.

At the hilltop, Hyunjin continued, singing, *"I remember long ago, another starry night like this,"* which meant yes fucking way, the siren of Bermuda really was going to sacrifice himself and save their asses to one of ABBA's greatest.

Jinyoung sighed tiredly, tried to edge him along again. "Come on, kid."

But Jisung stayed right where he was. Because at that moment, watching that beautiful, relentless bastard face off a whole legion of brainwashed nature monsters on his own, he finally got it: Hyunjin ran away not to leave you behind, but to protect you. He ran not because he didn't care enough, but because he cared too much. *And after all this time, I finally understand.*

"In the firelight, Fernando, you were humming to yourself and softly strumming your guitar,"

"Hold it," Jisung whispered. With no guitar in hand, he raced right back up that hill as Jinyoung made one last belated grab for him. As he ran, he could have sworn he heard the leviathan chuckle.

Hyunjin's first wave of opponents, a quintet of sandbox tree nymphs, rushed forward, spiked branches shooting out like spears to slice through his hurricane. He gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the second verse when a barricade of tree roots shot up out of the ground, blocking their attack.

"They were closer now, Fernando," Jisung sang, sweeping a dumbstruck Hyunjin behind him, strengthening the roots. *"Every hour, every minute seemed to last eternally,"*

"I was so afraid, Fernando, we were young and full of life, and none of us prepared to die,"

"And I'm not ashamed to say the roar of guns and canons almost made me cry,"

Behind the wall, their enemies rumbled. And of course, Jisung chose that moment to look at a slackjawed Hyunjin and say, "Well, come on, you barnacle, I know you know how to match pitch."

Just like that, Hyunjin knew he was going to love that stubborn shithead forever.

The smile that burst over his face could have been made of gold. When he sang again, it was with the strength of all seven seas.

On, *"There was something in the air that night,"* the tide rose up with Hyunjin's hands and crashed over the cliff bluff, showering the whole grove and knocking their waiting wave of enemies into Jisung's barrier roots. Water washed around their ankles and sprayed the air with sea salt. *"The stars were bright, Fernando,"*

Jisung stared, initial shock only lasting for a second before it split into a grin as he loosened his barrier, joined him in harmony as they

advanced up the cliff, through their adversaries in a lethal barrage of flora, fauna, and ocean upsurge. *"They were shining there for you and me, for liberty, Fernando,"*

The rest of their coven found them fighting back to back against a ring of brawlers, roots lashing out at jutting thorns, water blades cleaved through boulders, launching spores of poison over the edge. Even as the circle moved in smaller, there was no worry on their faces, in their voices, in their elements. In fact, as the mud golem twins took on either side and turned their arms to javelins to stake them through, they *smiled*.

Jisung grabbing Hyunjin's hand, they ducked, spun under the spears that splintered over their heads, and jumped using the whiplash root he summoned from the earth as liftoff fuel. For the barest moment, they turned suspended in the air, arms around each other like they were dancing in a Colorado roadside bar once again.

"Though we never thought we could lose, there's no regret,"

Gravity drew them back down, and they landed in a lotus bulb of roots that contained them just long enough for them to switch spots and strike back- Jisung using the roots to launch the surrounding attackers into the air, Hyunjin using the water he'd collected to catch them like butterflies in a net.

"If I had to do the same again, I would, my friend, Fernando,"

He catapulted them over the grove into oblivion, where the fish would be waiting to greet them. With no more enemies to fight, he could look at Jisung, look at the sunkissed smile on his face and return it, finish the song in peace.

"Yes, if I had to do the same again, I would, my friend, Fernando."

Behind them on the uphill path, their friends cheered, shouted, wolf whistled- regardless of how long they'd been around for the show, it certainly was something to applaud.

Hyunjin and Jisung laughed at them, at each other, at everything that had happened in such little time. The spriggan's eyes drifted down to their hands, still holding fast.

"So," he murmured. "You love me." It was a fact now, something he could say and know it true.

Hyunjin squeezed his hand. "Ever doubt it again, and I'll throw you off this cliff."

Both Stray Kids and Got7 were lumbering up to congratulate their victory. "I think I can do you one better."

With a running leap, he took their joined hands and- pulling an Advil of the sea out of his jacket pocket -cannonballed off the ledge.

They broke through the blue in an explosion of bubbles, Jisung laughing and Hyunjin swearing like two separate breeds of maniacs.

"Jesus *pennydicked* Christ- fucking God- do you ever think about what you *do*, what you *say*, what you-"

"I love you too!"

The bubbles faded, and all that was left was a turquoise that kept them floating through open space, slowing down speed, slowing down time just for the two of them. Hyunjin looked at him the way he had on the sunset shore at the Fortunate Isles- like he was never going to expect his next move. His eyes were never going to be just one shade of blue, Jisung realized. Maybe, if this time really was right, he would get to know them all.

Hyunjin drifted nervously towards him, weaving his arms around his neck, fingers trailing sparks along the nape of his neck. Jisung wove his arms around his waist and tried not to think, *I've always wanted to hold you like this*. They were a relic drowned, entwined and enamored with the love in their arms.

When they kissed, there was no one telling them to stop, to think twice, that this was wrong. There was just them, their bodies pressed together in the summer sea, with a taste like sea salt and hibiscus tea and a paradise long since lost blooming on their lips. It felt like terror. It felt like freedom.

It felt like the beginning.

Dusk Till Dawn - ZAYN, Sia

*Fireflies - The Owl City

*you should see me in a crown - Billie Eilish

*Seven Nation Army - The White Stripes

*Fernando - ABBA

*Snapdragons: Deception.

*Azalea: Balance.

*Gladiolus: Strength and resilience.

*Lotus: Purity, sanity

*Yellow rose: Anxiety, disdain, mental illness.

*Lily of the valley: Pain, loss.

*Periwinkle: Sadness, nostalgia, longing for past.

*Purple orchid: Authority, royalty.

At My Worst

Chapter 26: At My Worst

The aftermath of the battle + Irene + everything that happened in between. Hyunjin and Jisung still have a lot to talk about, in terms of what's happened between them and what they want to be to each other, but if the worst has truly passed, then I think we'll be okay.

I need somebody who can love me at my worst,
Know I'm not perfect, but I hope you'll see my worth,
Since it's only you, nobody new, I'll put your first,
And for you, girl, I swear I'll do the worst...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Once they'd resurfaced, there was the rest of the world to deal with.

Their members had found them trudging up the shore smiling, knowing, and not saying a word. As they lead them onto the grass, the ground crunched under their feet- dying adze, rid of their hosts, crawling for the sea as a futile hope for escape.

Jisung frowned, trying to step around them. "I don't remember this as a location perk."

"Remember when I said we had to ask Baekhyun for help?" said Chan. "He told us about the adze- they're basically mind control bugs who feed off their host's negative emotions, connecting them to one source."

"Was that what you pulled off me?" The vampire nodded. "Huh." After a moment of consideration, Jisung came back with: "I was akumatized?"

Seungmin sighed. "Yup. He's back."

"What're they all doing?" asked Felix.

Minho scanned the layout ahead. "There's hundreds of them," he noted. "Just about as many as there are people on the island."

Groans erupted all around the island- beings were rising to their feet, rubbing their heads and eyes, waking up. Some were asking others just what the hell had happened. Others were sinking to their knees, groping the bark and grass with a disconcerted fascination.

"I think they're gonna need some help," whispered Jeongin. He didn't get any argument.

They spread the word to Got7 and got to work. It was gratifying to find that their former opponents were much more friendly to them now that they weren't possessed. As they were helped to their feet, sat back against rocks and spoken to, the boys realized there wasn't just one state of mind- depending on how long they'd been on the island, there were some that remembered their time in the cavern briefly and their past lives like yesterday. There were some that only remembered bits and pieces of their past lives. There were some that hardly remembered anything.

"I could have sworn it was just yesterday that I arrived," a diwata murmured against a boulder, Youngjae nodding along as he held her hand for support. "Now I don't even know when that was."

Those who were more independent set about looking for other survivors, digging through ground and rubble for food, searching the island for evidence of a world beyond. Cries of pain sparked from all over the land- not from injury, but simply by looking up.

“It’s been years since they’ve seen real sunlight,” Jisung explained. “For some, decades.”

The cavern itself had caved in completely- apparently, an entire cult of brainwashed smashing through the walls was too much for it to handle. Stone had crumbled to the ground below, reduced to rubble that snapped the redwoods and kapoks in half; not that it had been the main cause of harm. With no magic to keep it alive, no lives to live beneath its roof, there was nothing to keep the ecosystem inside alive. The grass drained of green and soured to a flaxen yellow, flowers that had stuck around for show withered into gray stalks, their petals scouring the rocks. Even now, they could step over the crushed remains of the giant lotus and say ‘good riddance.’

“Not all the flowers are dying,” noted Changbin. He was talking about the ones who bloomed beneath the wreckage, glittering under the light. “What’s with that?”

“The lost souls have finally found peace,” said a voice behind them- the rose nymph, made almost ghostly by the sunlight. The lines of their face were less austere; perhaps they had found peace too. “There’s no longer anything binding them down.”

The others were set off by their appearance, but Jisung smiled. “That much we can be grateful for.”

From farther off, beyond a fallen redwood and cleaved boulder, there were groans of despair. “No...”

Jackson took to the skies first to check it out; their concern eroded to dread when he said, “It’s her.”

They followed the pain, picking past the wreckage of crumbled rocks and fallen trees, followed a breadcrumb trail of purple orchid petals to the trunk of the redwood, where Irene was.

She lay in a grave of her own making, collapsed over the ruins of her throne, trying and failing to push the tree off of her. Not even the

weeds responded to her summons; she didn't have any energy left to give in return, and it showed. With every move she made, her skin drained of color, fading a sickly, papery gray. Her hair was thinning out to the color of ash. Even the dark evergreen of her eyes was sapping away, leaving nothing but the shell to which she'd been reduced.

Even, when Irene saw them descending upon her, she gritted her teeth, pushed up off the rocks. "Back," she hissed. "Get *back*, all of you."

"End of the line, Irene," announced Jaebum.

She lashed out at them- just an inch, not really getting anywhere, breathing heavy, growling like a cornered stray. "You think this is a victory," Irene seethed. "You think you've *won*, haven't you?"

"Is she still gonna try and fight?" Bambam murmured.

"No," Youngjae whispered. His bright demeanor had been covered with a storm cloud of solemn. "Look."

"You're *pathetic*, all of you," Irene ranted on. The sallow flesh of her clavicle sank to the bone with every word she spoke, crinkling like old papyrus against it, rotting away. "Thinking you've chose the dream life, Manifest Destiny, *bullshit*. You're living a lie. You will wither in it, die in it, and rot, rot, *rot*."

"Are we about to watch someone Mother Gothel, because I couldn't even watch the Wicked Witch melt in the Wizard of Oz," Felix whispered.

Against his better judgment, Jisung stepped down towards her, hand extended. "Irene, let me-"

"*No!*" She snapped back, wild as a rabid dog. "Get away from me! You traitor, weakling, *coward*. You had your chance for my mercy!"

"I can help you-"

"I don't need your help! Years, I spent, forty years I spent, building an empire all on my own! I lived off lives more worthless than yours- they were more use to me, anyways!" The tree was pressing its weight down on her, wood creaking as her body weakened, as the rasp of her voice grated on defiance. "You come to me now, when I gave you truth. I gave you home, purpose, security, a gift of safety, and you threw it away for a mirage. You *imbecile*. All the years I wasted on trying to find you, and you leave it all like this."

Jisung, mouth twisted in a line, moved to say more, do more, try to prevent the inevitable, when a hand touched his shoulder.

"Just leave her be," said Mark softly, prodding him along. "Let's go."

The rest of their covens were waiting behind them; Hyunjin was slipping his hand into his. Closing his eyes to Irene's screeches of madness, Jisung walked back up the deconstructed cavern and turned his back on Irene for the last time.

In under an hour, the island found itself a new organizer in the rose nymph, who was decidedly better suited for the job outside of the darkness of the cavern. The group of them looked up at a cutting whistle through the air- Jaebum was beating his wings in the air, holding out a conscious, kicking Baekhyun by the collar.

"Do with this one as you will," Minho told the rose nymph, shoving him off towards them. "Maybe for once he'll learn something good."

"It will be my debt to you repaid," they answered.

"We'll check in with you guys," Jinyoung promised. "Make sure everything runs smoothly."

"We all came here in search of a home," the rose nymph reflected. Looking out at the mess of beings still trying to find their way, there was nothing but hope in their eyes. "Maybe we'll find it yet."

“Good luck,” said Jisung. “And thank you.”

He stepped into the water where the covens were waiting; wings were out, bodies were transformed. Chan pulling him onto the leviathan’s back, they took off on a course set for north across the Gulf, headed back for home.

Naturally, once they got there, it wasn’t just sleeping off the wounds they’d sustained. The very minute they were safe through the gates, Mark ran straight for his gardening shed, Youngjae and Jinyoung in tow, and ran back with their arms stocked full of all the natural herbs, potions, and cordials a being could make in years of peace on an island.

“No one is toughing out anything,” Mark told them. “If anyone is bleeding, injured or even minorly inconvenienced, sit the fuck down.”

In moments, the courtyard and living room was transformed into an infirmary; the wounded were laid across steps and on couches and chairs while Bambam brought in strawberry daiquiris.

“Nectar instead of alcohol for healing purposes,” Bambam explained to a skeptical Jinyoung. “Someone had to keep the mood light.”

“And for that, we are ever grateful,” said a passing Changbin with his arm in a sling, plucking a glass off the tray.

It was either let the pain fade and probably get infected, or surrender to Mark’s threat of strapping them to the ground, so it was an easy routine to settle into.

“This is gonna hurt a bit,” Youngjae warned Jackson, who was seated on the steps with his back facing him, wings spread out. “But try to hold still.”

The griffin laughed. “I crashed into the sea with a burning ship, I think I can- *ow!*” He winced hard, squeezing Mark’s hand, who’d stayed for moral support. “*Damn* it.”

“Still think it was a good idea to uproot that venomous oleander bush?” Mark teased.

“Worth it. So worth it.” Jackson winced again as Youngjae applied more salve to his wings. “You said you’d support me. Tell me I’m doing great.”

“You’re a dumbass who decided to fly in front of one of the most poisonous local plants known to man so he could get his kicks.” Mark smiled, squeezing his hand in comfort. “You’re doing great.”

Moving on to the living room couch with Seungmin and Jeongin:

“Jesus *wept*,” Seungmin murmured incredulously.

Jeongin tried to turn around and look up at him. “Is it that bad?”

“Half the size of a plum, but no, hardly bad.” Seungmin gingerly analyzed the knot on his head, having parted the hair around it. “Remind me again how this happened?”

“I told Jackson to throw me on a meliai.” Jeongin waved to the griffin, who shot a painstaking finger gun back. “She just happened to have the ability to turn her hands into cactus bulbs.” The werewolf groaned. “Hey- you should be thankful I managed to shake off the thorns before they sunk in too deep.”

“Yes, I am ever so thankful that I didn’t have to do *that*.” Seungmin scoffed; anyone close enough might have heard a laugh. “Why do I always get these jobs with you?”

“Simple- I call, you come, and, so far, it’s a routine that works in our favor.”

“*Your* favor,” he corrected, a soft smile poking at the corner of his mouth. He grazed the bump, and Jeongin hissed. “Sorry.”

However, as represented by Jinyoung and Yugyeom, not all healing was so gentle.

"I hate you," muttered Jinyoung, bent stubbornly over Yugyeom's knee.

"I know," the poltergeist droned, looking off into space.

"I can't fucking believe you would do this to yourself."

"And yet I did."

"This was supposed to be a simple rescue mission, in and out." He gestured angrily to the bloody gash along his knee. "Now I have to give you *stitches* because you couldn't play it safe!"

"If it makes you feel any better, I can't feel it."

"*That is worse!*" Yugyeom shrugged, let him continue his ministrations. "Literally in what context would you pile drive one of Irene's right hand men from the air?"

"His *name* is Xiaojun, and in my defense, he was the one invading my line of sight."

"Hold up, that was *you*?" asked Jaebum. Yugyeom nodded.
"*Daaamn-*"

"Do *not* high five him for that," Jinyoung snapped.

Nonplussed, Jaebum obeyed, drifting away- but not before slipping Yugyeom the smoothest low five of all time behind his back.

By the window, another duo had nabbed a loveseat; though the scene itself was a little less romantic.

"Ow."

"Just try to hold still."

"I'm sorry, I'm trying, just- *fuck!*"

“Ooh, that was a little much, wasn’t it?”

But Changbin was already on his feet, hands in the air. “Nope. Nope. Not doing this anymore. I’m out.”

“Come on!” Felix complained. “I’m almost done!”

“I will heal the way that my ancestors did, and those before them,” the demon announced. “Through time, toil, and no magic.”

“Get your 50’s bullshit out of this. You’re still bleeding out!”

The wound he’d been trying to mend was a gash on the side of his upper arm; the halfway point of his arm had been sealed shut with a white scar, but it remained open where the wound met the shoulder. “That’s the blood that was already there. It’s a very sexy wound.”

“You were *thrown* into a *tree* by a guy three times bigger than you. I watched you fall!”

“And so I will deal with the consequences.” Tiny wave. “Goodbye.”

By his good arm, Felix dragged Changbin backwards. “No.”

“Can’t you just get a band-aid or something?”

“A band-aid won’t cut this. You’re the one who keeps throwing yourself into these situations, and since you don’t drag yourself out, I do.” He shoved Changbin forcefully back onto the loveseat. “So you are going to sit down-”

“*Meh.*”

“Shut up -”

“*Ugghhh.*”

“And let me *work.*”

The demon dumped his chin in his hand, grumbling some more. But when Felix pushed the sleeve of his shirt up his shoulder- hesitantly, like the cloth would wither -he shut up fast, using the rest of his conscience to focus intently on the next pillar over.

It didn't take long for them to notice Chan and Minho not-so-secretly watching them from afar, having stitched up each others' wounds earlier. Both of them had the same smiling, twinkly look on their faces; both Changbin and Felix had no clue why. "What?"

MinChan just shrugged, grinning and knowing and willing to watch it play out. "Nothing," they replied, whisking happily away to find some other pair to annoy.

The demon and angel watched them go. They looked back at each other at the same time, startling a little in surprise.

"I thought you were going to heal me?" asked Changbin.

"Fuck you," Felix muttered, shaking his head as he bent down over the cut, hair falling forward to hide his smile. This time, the corner of Changbin's mouth tucked up softly, he didn't make himself look away.

Jisung watched it all go down by the staircase; Jinyoung appeared next to him with an empty tray of nectar on his hand.

Jisung nodded to the glasses. "You have anyone to look after you?"

"Not much I couldn't take care of myself," Jinyoung replied. "I'm what I like to call a smart fighter. What about you?"

"I was pretty well protected."

Jinyoung chuckled. "Right."

They observed the scene; couples and friends assessing and dressing wounds, Minho and Chan making themselves useful by passing around the cut ambrosia squares that Youngjae swore

weren't lemon bars, he'd made them himself. Bambam's summer vibes playlist was humming through the room, filling the first floor of the temple with The Cranberries.

"He's upstairs," Jinyoung whispered suddenly. "I think he's waiting for you."

*"I want more, impossible to ignore, impossible to ignore,"**

Jisung knew what he was talking about, but still his breath caught. "You think so?"

"Pretty sure I know my brother." Jinyoung flicked his eyes up at the staircase. "Best not to stretch it out any longer."

"And they'll come true, impossible not to do, possible not to do,"

For both of us, Jisung thought. Pushing his breath out in an exhale, he started up the stairs, balancing a hand on the railing to stop it shaking.

"And now I tell you openly, you have my heart so don't hurt me,"

He shouldn't be nervous, he knew that- after everything that happened, he had nothing to be nervous about anymore. No Irene, no mind bugs, no Wild Hunt. *Just him.*

"You're what I couldn't find."

But maybe this was the scary part: the aftermath. The part where you dealt with the consequences because you were alive to deal with them, jumped and hoped it wasn't another cliff. There was nothing that could make him forget the look in Hyunjin's eyes on the island, glaring into his when he said they should talk. *What if he hasn't forgiven me after all?*

Jisung's hand stilled on the railing.

"A totally amazing mind, s o understanding and so kind,"

"You're everything to me."

Then they would talk. They would talk, as Hyunjin had promised he would, and if they fought, so be it. They had already given each other the truth, crossed over the obstacle in their way. Now all that was left was this.

He climbed the final step, looked out at the vantage point where the afternoon sun lay ahead, and there Hyunjin was. At the sound of his arrival, he turned, and they were floating in the ocean again, nothing in their way but the world.

"Oh, my life is changing every day, in every possible way,"

Whatever happens, Jisung reminded himself, remember that he went back for you. He kissed you- twice, now. And he told you he loved you and meant it.

"And oh, my dreams, never quite as it seems,"

"Come here," Hyunjin beckoned, voice sweet as the song of a conch shell.

"Cause you're a dream to me, dream to me."

Leaving the last of his reassurances at the door, Jisung obeyed, pacing forward, closer and closer until he was right by his side, overlooking the crashing waves. "Hey."

Hyunjin made no move to touch him, but the smile on his face pinched the corners of his eyes, still worn and raw from everything that came before. *Still beautiful.* "Hi."

The music an echo from the underground, Jisung imitated his pose- elbows out on the railing, bent over the shoreline -and followed his gaze to the horizon.

"Jinyoung tell you I was up here?"

"Yeah. He seemed pretty pleased with the duty of delivery boy."

Hyunjin scoffed. "And he'll take any excuse to rub it in."

Jisung inched a step closer. Even with everything they'd done, it still felt like a risk. "Well, not to discredit him any, but. I kinda assumed anyway."

The siren's mouth quirked up. "You did, did you?"

"What can I say? You've always been a sucker for a panoramic view. Anything you can look at long enough to paint."

"Never realized you kept a study on me."

"I had a couple decades to kill."

This didn't evoke a smile or laugh, or any kind of change in expression; if anything, it drew Hyunjin's features lower, longer, dropped his eyes from the ocean. The boy was the sea itself, everchanging blue, no magic involved. "What happened to you?" he whispered.

So that's how it starts.

Jisung looked away. "I was an idiot again," he said. "I thought if I just talked to her, stuck with peace, with reason, she'd leave us alone- at least for a little while." Out of his periphery, Hyunjin's eyes darted up scan his profile, analyzing the truth. "She planted the adze on me, and I didn't move away. I didn't even feel it. I just thought it was her way of agreeing. Some weird, cryptic last goodbye."

"You didn't know."

"But I *should've*."

"None of us thought she would take it as far as she did."

"But I should have been prepared for *something*! I could've fought her, forced her off. It might have avoided this whole thing!"

"You didn't *want to*." The pull of Hyunjin's gaze was magnetic; it drew Jisung's eyes back up. "That's why you did what you did. You did everything you could to keep that from happening. If anything had gone differently, we all might have gotten hurt even worse. It isn't your fault that she took another direction."

"I knew her. I knew what her motivations were, what she was willing to do. I should've known she would try to twist it around."

"You saw good in someone who didn't deserve it. You gave her a chance- it's what you've done for everyone, regardless of who they are. Even if she'd gone, she only would've come back sooner or later. The fight was inevitable; you said it yourself: you knew her. You *knew* she wouldn't stop, but you had hope." Hesitantly, he reached up, brushed the hair out of his eye. "You're here, and you're safe. That's all that matters. You didn't do anything wrong."

But Jisung still didn't believe him. "How can you say that after what I did to *you*?"

The affection in his face faltered. The stay of his hand twitched in place. He took his eyes from Jisung's face, watched it drop loosely to his cheek. "Because," he murmured emptily, "maybe that was something that needed to happen."

It stuck like a rusted blade in his chest.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, actually, I don't." Hyunjin's hand fell away as he sighed, folded it back into himself. "In what world would you believe *that* needed to happen for us to get where we are?"

He squared up, tensed his shoulders. "The adze feeds off of negative emotions," Hyunjin said. It sounded rehearsed. "Acts on them. Anything the host is feeling, thinking, whether active or not."

"What does that -" And then it clicked; horribly, vividly, it clicked. "Oh, fuck no."

"Jisung-"

"Where did you even hear this?"

"Chan told you we kidnapped Baekhyun, right?"

"Seriously? *Baekhyun*? You're gonna believe a word *that* skidmark says?"

"Well, being the one who waterboarded it out of him, I don't think it's something he'd have lied about!" Jisung breathed out haggardly, shoving his hands through his hair. "It makes sense."

"No, it doesn't," he spat, but the words came out feebly, like needles instead of knives. "I-I was *possessed*, saying shit that I would *never* say, doing things I'd never do! I- I snapped at the others-"

"The bug messing with your subconscious -"

"I snapped at *you* -"

"Definitely had material to work with -"

"I told you that I didn't love you!"

That, Hyunjin didn't deflect. "You told me that you had," he said quietly, a soft rasp to his tone. "But I'd been too scared to accept what was right in front of me."

His voice sounded dull, gray as iron, gray as slate. They hurt to hear, knowing that it was about himself, but they came out like the truth.

"Is that why you kissed me back?"

Hyunjin didn't even shrug, even blink out of his apathy. "I didn't think I'd get another chance," he said. "And then you ran."

Jisung watched his somber face track over the calming waves. *This is what he thinks of himself*, the spriggan realized. Then, deeper, somewhere in the back of his mind that turned the darkest whisper into a resounding echo: *I did this*.

He had to convince him- somehow -that it wasn't true. "In all the years I've known you, I have never, ever wanted to hurt you like that."

"Maybe some part of you did- for the way I treated you."

"You had your reasons-"

"I was *afraid*, Jisung," he seethed. "You were right. I acted like I didn't care because I thought it was safer- I hurt you because I didn't want to get hurt myself. I was a coward."

"Okay, first of all, stop referencing the shit possessed me said- he was a dick. Second- "

"He said all the things you held back," Hyunjin cut him off, refusing to hear it. "He was a dick, but he was honest."

"*Second*," Jisung repeated. "I told you what I was afraid of. I didn't tell you how I felt."

"Didn't I hear enough?"

But there was a crack in his voice; he didn't want to believe he did. *Something I can fix*.

Jisung stepped closer. "I never told you that I didn't care how long it would take," he said slowly, carefully. "I would have waited forever, if that's how long it took for you to be ready. I mean, shit, it's not like we have a shortage on time." The tears were taking form in Hyunjin's eyes. "You have to believe me. That much you have to know is true."

“And I do,” he croaked. “God, I want to.”

“Then why don't you?”

“Because it doesn't take back what I did to you.”

His fingers had curled in a trembling grip on his elbows. “Is that why?” Hyunjin scoffed. “Jin, I've forgiven you years ago-”

“*Why?*” His face turned towards Jisung's; his eyes were glassy and rubbed red. “Why do you think I deserve it?”

The reasons I can't even begin to list. “Because I knew it wouldn't matter. We'd move past it, and you would've never had to know-”

“Because *that* would make it better.”

Jisung wanted to grab the earth by the shoulders and shake it; he wanted to scream into the ocean. “What does that even *mean?*”

“Would you ever have told me?” The anger had been scratched off the surface; now what was left was sorrow- the question he'd been left with since the cursed night before. “Or would we have just let it lie, not knowing why we still fight so much, when *this* is what's eating us up inside?”

Jisung stared; he could spend a lifetime doing so, and still be left with nothing but questions. “Don't you want us?”

“Of course I do. I-” Hyunjin tilted his face up to the sun, swallowed down something hard and forbidden. “I want you-”

“Then fucking *have me.*”

“But I just-” His hand squeezed the stone railing, let go of its white knuckled hold, and came to a rest before Jisung's. “Back on Irene's island. When I kissed you, did it...” he struggled, trying to push the words out. “Did it hurt?”

"What?" *Of everything he could ask, of course he chose the thing that makes the least sense.* "No. No, it didn't."

"Good." He glanced at the tiny space between their hands like it was an abyss, a gash between them. "I don't want to hurt you anymore."

The ocean crashed to the surf below, seafoam rising, falling, sighing against the earth. The thrum of the music below faded away; it was nothing compared to them.

"Jin," Jisung whispered, brushing the tears out of his eye and the hair behind his ear; his skin felt like fire. Hyunjin's eyes were fixed ruthlessly on the hollow pulse of his heartbeat. *See me*, he pleaded. It felt like he was choking down a stone. *Listen to me.* "You've never-" He stopped; they both knew it would be a lie if he finished. "You didn't mean to..." The words wouldn't come; he was afraid of how much more they would hurt if he said them wrong. "Hyunjin, I-"

"Hey, losers!" Chan shouted from the staircase, thoroughly destroying the illusion of solitude. "Get downstairs, we're watching *Before Sunrise!*"

Because they lived with a coven full of guys who believed that 90's romance movies were the perfect way to heal any wound beyond the surface. Naturally.

They'd both whipped their heads around to follow his voice. Hyunjin's eyes were touched wider with panic, desperation. Already, he was shutting down, shutting back the words they'd come to say.

But I'm not done, Jisung thought. "Let's get out of here." This woke Hyunjin up, snapped his eyes back to him. "Come on. We don't have to go where they go."

One second of consideration, two, then Hyunjin whispered, "Where?"

"I saw another island a few miles away on our way back here. Looked vacant. Civil."

Hesitantly, Hyunjin lifted a hand to Jisung's where it cupped his face; he curled his fingers around it. "If you throw me off another cliff, I'll split your head open on this rock," he told him in a voice like subtle, passive aggressive death.

Somehow, Jisung had managed to avoid it for this long. *Guess he really likes me.* "I'll let you keep your dignity."

Taking that as a promise, Hyunjin accepted it with a nod, taking their intertwined hands to Bambam's cats' towers on the wall opposite to the staircase and climbed through to reach the highest tree branch. "Jaebum keeps the speedboats around here," he explained. "You coming or what?"

"This was literally my idea," Jisung hissed, but followed him down.

Surprisingly enough, it was Hyunjin who scaled the tree without a hitch. Jisung, whose usual route was jump from the top and hope he didn't shatter any bones, was taking considerably longer this time around.

"So you'll jump off a stories-high cliff-"

"Shut up." Jisung stepped down another branch.

"Come on, at this rate, the first scene's gonna be almost over."

"Well, do you want me to land on you? I don't think crashlanding on your face would detail a successful escape."

"You're literally halfway down. Just freefall it like you usually do."

"Nope."

"Don't be nervous. Just pretend I'm like, a flower bush, or something. Soft, reliable, unassuming."

"Hate you."

Rolling his eyes, Hyunjin examined the dirt under his nails. "Won't be the only time I'll have you on top of me." A branch cracked, and Jisung plummeted from his fourth of the way down on a bed of azaleas. "There he is."

"Knew I could hear your smirk from there," Jisung grumbled, cheeks burning red.

"Well, it sped you up, didn't it?" Hyunjin offered a hand, which he begrudgingly took. "Chan made three bowls of popcorn. We've got the time."

"You are," Jisung started, pulling him close under the magnolia tree, "the absolute worst decision I've ever made."

Hyunjin took exactly one second to lament on all the sinful and saintly things he would do for him and accepted them all. "Let's go."

Jaebum kept his boats by the sea caves, where they were hidden by a shifting wall of algae that seemed to whisper with the voices of ghosts. Revving the engine, Jisung led them off northeast of the Fortunate Isles for a green speck in the distance, leaving a frothy white trail of disturbed seafoam behind them as they rode away.

While Hyunjin kept them on course, he snuck glances at Jisung every now and then- not just to make sure he hadn't fallen off the boat. The spriggan sifted his hand through the water, drawing to him the kelp and red algae that seemed to float magnetically to the surface, the way Kkami did to a patch of sunlight in the summer.

"One of the reasons why I stayed away from the water for so long," Jisung said, not even looking to see if Hyunjin was looking back,

"was because I didn't think I had anything nearby I could control. Ground myself with."

Not because he'd almost been drowned by a whole lake that stole his first home from him. But because something deep inside of him was still, stubbornly scared of being untethered again. "You don't have to explain that to me." They both knew it.

The speck turned into a land form, which became the solid ground of a seashore that they drove the bow of their ship into to steady its drift. Hyunjin helping Jisung out of the port, they walked on hand in hand, hickory trees swallowing up the space behind their backs.

In spite of the millions of creatures that had tried to kill them ever since they set foot outside Portland, the little island seemed generally harmless. The golden sunspark sprites that flitted around their heads, more curious than malicious, took the place of butterflies; down at their feet, an otter holding a rock floated placidly by on a lake that cut through, egrets and bitterns chirping their greetings at this new arrival. The only minorly threatening part was when a grindylow had started to rise out of a pond, black hair like oil, fangs bared, yellow eyes glowing with their pupils filed into slits- when she took them in properly, scanning their appearances and joined hands. Approving, the grindylow capped off a pair of wordless finger guns and sank back into her pond.

"Civil," quipped Hyunjin.

A clearing haloed by flowering dogwood trees opened itself up to them, made musical by the song of the sparrows in the trees. The grass was green as budding spring, shot through with specks of pink clovers.

Hyunjin nudged Jisung's arm. "Did you make reservations at this place and not tell me?"

"Maybe whatever asshole Felix ran away from felt bad for making us live through the past three days and wanted to do something nice."

Strolling ahead, Jisung spun and flopped down on the grass like a sunnyside up starfish, looking right at home. "Well? Come here."

Like you even had to ask, Hyunjin thought, only letting it through in a smile. "Coming, coming."

He strode into the center and laid down beside him, stifling a giggle as Jisung shifted on his side to look at him. "You're staring."

"I am," Jisung replied, smile spreading into a grin as Hyunjin's laughter brushed the clovers. "Oh my God."

"What?"

"This." He swatted at the air between them. "Is this our first date?"

"Is it?" Jisung shrugged, a slightly exclamatory wordless version of *you tell me*. Hyunjin could hear the sparrows chirping away at a new tune. "Oh my God, no."

"What?"

"No!"

"But look just look at it! The trees, the sky, the fucking *birds*. It's perfect!"

"But it's not our *first* date."

"Sorry, have you been dating me without my knowledge?"

"Well, I've had feelings for you a lot longer than just the past few years- quit fucking smiling like that." Very deliberately Jisung did not. "So, going off that exact timeline, our first date was our first job together."

The spriggan's brows furrowed. "When was that?"

"You don't remember?" Tiny headshake. "1991. Reno? Club Cal Neva?"

Jisung's confused pout remained for just a beat longer before it blew apart with a gasp. "With the Mongolian Death Worm!"

"Before anyone knew jack shit about Area 51."

"Awww, I remember it now. That was such a fun drive."

"All the arguments we got in about Van Halen and the ending of Back to The Future."

"Sharing drive-through chicken and waffles with that stray cat we found off the side of the road until she jumped out of the car to chase a rat."

Hyunjin cackled. "Remember how we spent fifteen whole minutes convincing the motel clerk that we weren't together and she *still* put us in rooms right across from each other?"

"That was *hilarious*."

"We both ended up watching Say Anything while on call with each other anyway."

"Man, I still know the words to In Your Eyes*."

"You too?" Blushing, Jisung nodded. "*Ugh*. I couldn't even sleep afterwards."

"And still we went out the next day and caused the most property damage Nevada had seen since Pleasant Valley- me using cacti to break through the floor and tie down the literal worm from Dune, you breaking the sewage system with Kids In America*."

Hyunjin sighed at the memory. "Our Budapest."

"Yeah," Jisung hummed dreamily. "That still wasn't our first date though."

"Are you serious."

"Hey, hear me out." Hyunjin rolled his eyes in silence. "2005. The Shakespeare Garden."

"Huh?" Realizing gasp. "Ohhh, *right!*"

"Yeah, remember? I'd been asking the others to go with me for weeks, and everyone finally said yes, but when I went to meet everyone by the entrance, you were the only one who showed!"

"They set us up, I *hate* them."

"But still, you let me drag you around, point out all the different kinds of flowers."

"Only because they were finally in season," Hyunjin countered.

"And that old lady explained the story behind the damask rose."

"Oh! And then when you took a picture of me in the gazebo, you stepped back so far you fell into a shrub!"

"I was trying to get the angle right!" Jisung said defensively. "But you made up for laughing at me with coffee afterwards."

"And we walked home instead of racing," Hyunjin laughed fondly, a pink clover tickling his cheek. "That was a good day." Jisung watched him through his periphery, like he was trying to take another photo with his mind. "What now?"

"I'm just wondering," he murmured, soft enough to touch the dirt beneath the grass, "if we're able to laugh about everything before, why are you so scared of hurting us now?"

Hyunjin felt his smile thin away. The birds stopped singing- he couldn't hear them over the wind. "You really want to know that?"

"That's all I want to know." A new clover* sprouted to skim his shoulder; Jisung hadn't looked away. "You brought an army to kill my demon. I want to know how I can help take down yours."

His mind had been pulled away from the sounds of the sky to the bassline of the earth, the waves crashing against the shore, a familiar, lulling rhythm.

Hyunjin turned on his side to face Jisung, squeezed gently the hand that caught his. He knew he could trust it not to let go.

"In the life I had before," he started, "back in the Triangle, I took everything I had for granted. The house, the records, my siblings, all of it. Everything I didn't know mattered the most because, I..." Hyunjin searched the blades of green for the right words. "I'd never imagined any other life. I never saw any other way it could be, because... for me, it was all just right there. Anything I could've wanted, just the right amount, all where it was in reach when I wanted it. And if it wasn't there, I could trust someone else to bring it in. The tide to bring back my siblings, the music, all so I would never have to swim so far as to find it for myself. For the longest time, I was fine with that. A life full of fine, I could have lived it."

"But then Jinyoung got lost in the storm, and all of a sudden I couldn't reach everything."

"I got stuck. That's how it felt- like the rest of the world had just kept marching on, but I just stayed behind. Yeji stayed with me for a while- she was trying to get me to move, I think -but I didn't want to listen. Because I'd never been curious, I was afraid. Afraid of what would happen if I opened up to what was out there, to what could be. But- hell, I couldn't admit that, so I pushed her away. So far that I ended up in Eldritch, and they moved on with their lives, and even with when I met people who let me into theirs, for the longest time, I

couldn't do the same. No matter how much I wanted to, because how would I know it wouldn't just turn its back the minute I did?"

As Jisung nodded him along, eyes still kind and attentive and evergreen, Hyunjin remembered the kelp that reached up to poke through the ocean's surface, reaching out, hoping for a chance in the light. *Maybe I can finally give that to him.* "So, I guess I'm just wondering why, even though I've been stuck for so long, even though I've given him so many openings to leave me behind, I've still got someone trying to pull me free."

Jisung squeezed his hand the way he had, passing the pulse back. "Can I tell you something?"

"Shoot."

"That night at the pond, when we met. Before I even knew what you looked like, I wanted to know you."

And there he goes again. Automatically, Hyunjin scoffed. "Really?"

"Yeah, really. At first just so I could beat the shit out of you." He laughed; the motive was understandable. "And when I did- when I understood *why* you'd been so short with me and the others -I got it. You were angry. Of course you were. You'd been pushed into this world you didn't know out of the home you'd lived your whole life in. So had I. For the first time in my life, I'd met someone like me. And I wasn't disappointed in the least."

"Even though I led you on for thirty-eight years?"

"When I arrived at Levanter, a very wise djinn reminded me that all good things take time." A soft gust of wind brushed a few strands of hair into Hyunjin's eyes; Jisung tucked it behind his ear. "And, regardless of whether or not you believe it, that's what you are."

Something good. Something worth waiting for. *Still, he believes it.* "You kept coming back," Hyunjin said. "No matter how many times I

hurt you, or how much."

Jisung glanced at his hand over his cheek; perhaps he was thinking of the night before, when he hadn't been nearly so gentle.

"Sometimes, I felt like one of your paintings," he admitted. "I wasn't yet finished, or neat, or really that appealing to look at at all, but you never let me collect dust. Where I felt gray and drained of life, you gave it color and painted over the shades until they glowed. You lifted me up, put me in a place where I could feel the warmth of the day, kept me in your line of sight, always." He let his hand relax, press into the skin. "Where I saw nothing, you saw beauty, so I got enough sense together to see the same in you."

It was like he'd written one of his songs- there wasn't anything Hyunjin could say in response. All he was able to do was listen.

"What said those things to you last night was the worst of me, and that was someone you never should have met. I can promise you that you'll never hear them again, no matter what curse is put on me. Seriously, I don't care if I'm possessed or not- if I ever talk to you like that again, you better smack the shit out of me, understand?"

Hyunjin guffawed out of surprise. "Okay, okay."

"We've both hurt each other an equal amount- the only reason I ran last night was so that I could stop." The way he said it, the wind could have turned into a song on its own. "But I think we're done with that now. Because if you trust me as much as you know I trust you, then, well." He lifted their hands in a tiny thump above the grass. "I think we can give this a try."

He said it so simply, like they hadn't fought a forest and brought down boulders and scaled an ocean to get to where they were now. Frankly, Hyunjin had run out of incredibly profound things to say. And, also frankly, he would die in about fifteen seconds if he didn't get more of what Jisung so flagrantly labeled as *'this'* in his life.

So Hyunjin held onto the tether of his gaze and said, "You've always been beautiful to me."

And Jisung promptly laughed, an exhale of a sound chased by the flush crawling past his collar, raking his hair back with a flustered hand. "God," he giggled. "You *know* you can't say those things to me."

"Then try accepting them for a change." But Jisung laughed instead, and because they were lying in a field of flowers, having a conversation that had taken them almost four whole decades to put together, Hyunjin laughed too. "*Jesus*. Why am I just now realizing how cheesy we are?"

"Because now, there is no escape," Jisung declared theatrically, rolling on his back, a melodramatic hand thrust into the air. "I, as the plague in your mind, clouding every landscape you sketch. You, as the underlying subject of all my songs, in every lyric I write."

"Sing one," Hyunjin said before he could stop himself. Jisung quirked a bemused smile. "For me?"

And perhaps Jisung really did like him that much. Because while he didn't pull out an original, he picked a melody from the winds, eyes closed; he knew it by heart.

"I don't have much money, but, boy, if I did,"

"I'd buy a big house where we both could live,"

And Hyunjin's heart didn't melt in with the blood of his veins, rendering his body so anatomically incorrect and useless it couldn't do anything but listen and watch and smile, and he didn't inch himself closer while a bittern fluttered down to do the same, because *God*, he *just* said they were being too cheesy. But somewhere, Elton John was beaming down on them and saying, *fuck it*. So he did.

"If I was a sculptor, but, then again, no,"

"Or a man who makes potions in a traveling show, oh, I,"

The sprites filled the clear blue sky like afternoon stars as the egrets trotted out with sparrows on their backs, the drip-drip-drip of water in the background as the grindy low rose from her pond to listen to, *"I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do,"*

"My gift is my song." Jisung paused, opening one eye to peek and grin crookedly at Hyunjin. *"And this one's for you,"*

The whole rest of the forest gathered around in a scattered ring around them for, *"And you can tell everybody this is your song,"* because even though Hyunjin was the siren of the pair, Jisung's steady, featherlight voice singing, *"It may be quite simple but, now that it's done,"* was the most captivating thing they had ever heard.

"I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind, that I put down in words,"

"How wonderful life is while you're in the world,"

And, because Hyunjin had learned that certain songs were better in a duet, he sang along: *"How wonderful life is while you're in the world."*

Jisung's smile spread wider; with the whole sun shining on his face, he knew it wasn't some trick of the light. *"So excuse me forgetting, but these things I do,"*

"See, I've forgotten if they're green or they're blue,"

Looking into Hyunjin's eyes, as if to confirm for himself, Jisung confessed, *"Anyway, the thing is, what I really mean: yours are the sweetest eyes that I've ever seen,"*

They harmonized together, delivering the message to each other, *"And you can tell everybody, this is your song,"*

"It may be quite simple, but, now that it's done,"

"I hope you don't mind, I hope you don't mind, that I put down in words,"

"How wonderful life is while you're in the world,"

It had taken them long enough, years to bridge the gap and reach each other for real, but they had found their destination: two space oddities from different destroyed galaxies joining hands, sprawled out on a grass and flower bed on an island the size of the world, singing softly, slowly, sincerely: *"How wonderful life is, while you're in the world."*

At My Worst - Pink \$weat, Kehlani

*Dreams - The Cranberries

*In Your Eyes - Peter Gabriel

*Kids in America - Kim Wilde

*Your Song - Aaron Tveit, Karen Olivo

*Magnolia tree: luck, stability.

*Pink clover: gentleness, subtlety.

Interlude - The Other Side

Chapter 27: Interlude - The Other Side

For brief intermission, we flash back to 2019, a time of revelry and joie de vivre, where the boys live up one interstellar night on the town. Call it a hint, a spoiler, but enjoy either way!

*TW: brief description of a panic attack + police violence ahead.

Back on your feet again, lift your head, hold it high,
You wanna run it back, but you can't turn the tide,
You start to feel like you're losing your shine,
But the grass ain't always greener on the other side...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Past - 2019

Changbin kicked open his door. "An ice cube melted on the ground, now my sock is wet, who the fuck wants to *die*?"

"Please, no talk of death before the eleventh hour," Minho said irritably, brushing past him to change his jacket for the fourth time. "I want to get modestly drunk in blissful ignorance."

"And so you shall, my radiant orchid," Chan replied, passing him a periwinkle brocade jacket still on the hanger as he darted out the door. "Jisung, what shirt-"

"Cuban linen, white one, sleeves rolled up, top button down," Jisung supplied, shooting down the question with a dutiful finger gun.

Chan slipped him five as he went to find the nearest mirror. "You know best."

"Always do. Oh! And see if you can find that silver moon phase belt!" Hyunjin emerged from room 12 with an armful of clothes, stopping the spriggan in his tracks. "What were you doing in my room?"

"Finding clothes. I've been getting a little bored with my own selection," replied the siren shamelessly.

Jisung powerwalked backwards to keep up with him. "And so you thought of *my* closet as your own little thrift store?"

"It's not all yours, don't worry."

"So that *isn't* the jacket that I got from David Bowie's Serious Moonlight tour and gave to you *once* to borrow and coincidentally haven't seen since 1998?"

"Oh, no, it is. Which raises the question." Having reached his door at last, Hyunjin pivoted around to face him. "Do I wear your jacket out tonight." His hand twisted the knob. "Or do I wear anything under it?"

He whisked away into room 25 shutting the door behind him, leaving Jisung's jaw slacked down to his Adam's apple.

"I wonder if I should be afraid," Jisung wondered aloud to Changbin, who had reliably materialized beside him.

"I wouldn't worry about it," he replied. "He just wanted to give you the mental image of both."

"I'm still a little in the dark on what, exactly, is happening," squeaked Jeongin. He was perched on the railing of the second floor catwalk with Felix and Seungmin.

"I would take one for the team and ask, but I feel like I'd be too afraid to find out the answer," Seungmin piped. Changbin breezed past them, murmuring an internal battle with himself on whether or not to flip up the collar of the sleeveless leather jacket he wore over his red t-shirt.

"Screw it," Felix muttered, pushing off to tug him back by it. "Hey, Bin. You mind telling us what all this is?"

"Jisung!" Chan's voice yelled from room 17. "I found the belt!"

"Fuck *yeah!*" Jisung whooped.

Another door slammed; Hyunjin emerging from room 25 in Jisung's jacket- a blue denim number cuffed three times at the sleeves, decked out with painted stars, safety pins, spikes, and a patch from every 1980's David Bowie album - thrown over a white knit mesh top, looking like he'd just escaped the catalogue of a 1970's charity shop.

"If God were to exist and tell me I only had one day to dress like the Catholic church's worst nightmare and fill the streets with all the people can take of my music taste," he said, not even acknowledging their presence, "then I would thank him exactly once for Ostara."

"Hear, hear!" called Minho.

"What's Ostara?" asked Felix.

"The night of the vernal equinox that's been circled on the calendar for months," Changbin replied. "Have we seriously not told you guys?"

"Considering how long it took for us to get a decent answer in just one night, I'd have answered with less surprise," Seungmin quipped.

The demon pulled a face at him before moving on down the walkway, the rest of them following behind. "It's an old pagan tradition that the Salem witches took with them when they founded Eldritch. The whole town celebrates down on Main Street with food and music, and it's kind of the best part of living here."

"Plus the dryad who runs the boba cart stayed here once and became friends with Chan, so we get it free," Hyunjin added.

"But isn't the vernal equinox something that happens every year?" asked Jeongin. "Wouldn't we have seen it?"

"Yeah, but Eldritch is one of the few populations without the mortal veil over it," said Chan, undoing the top button of his shirt as he fell in step with them. "The ordinary equinox is just when night and day are in balance, but a time when the properties of light and darkness are in balance only happens on the one-hundred-eighty-third day of every leap year in every three decades at the change of every era."

Even Seungmin didn't look any less confused. "Which means...?"

"It takes a while," Minho summarized, gliding in beside them snapping the lapels of his galaxy brocade jacket.

"What exactly happens that makes it so great?" asked Felix.

"You know how the moon turns red when only sunlight passes through the atmosphere and turns blue when there are air particles slightly wider than the wavelength of red light?" Carefully, the angel nodded. "Put two colors and phenomena together, and what do you get?"

"Legendary purple moon?" Minho nodded, and Felix gasped. "*Cool.*"

"It's basically New Years but Halloween," Chan summarized. "If that makes any more sense."

"Even Changbin and I have only seen it twice," Jisung said, dropping out of his hospice looking how Howl would have dressed if he'd gone grunge. "But it's the kind of night you never forget if you manage to remember it."

"So, with that as an explanation," Hyunjin mused. "Are you three ready for it?"

Four stopped to look at three, which were decidedly underdressed for what they'd described: Jeongin was wearing a unicorn onesie, Seungmin in entirely undescript sweats, and Felix in a hoodie reading the words *Work, Work, Fashion Baby.* in glitter Arial text.

"I'm gonna go - "

"Just head down to my room..."

"Be back in a bit!"

"Let's wait at the door," suggested Chan. "I'll give them about fifteen minutes as a whole."

They took their group down to the entrance; just as the time hit the mark, Jeongin and Seungmin skidding to a halt off the courtyard perimeter- one with his pink platforms untied, the other dusting the brown fur off his My Neighbor Totoro overalls. For proper punctuation, Felix backflipped off the rail of the second floor, dressed and ready in a purposely oversized corduroy over an Age of Aquarius t-shirt. After receiving the seal-of-approval nod from Hyunjin, it was time to go.

Minho insisted they walk- not just because he'd forgot to put gas in the car, but in order for them to "truly understand the aesthetic." The farther they walked, the more of it they could see: paper bag lanterns lining the sidewalks, chalk drawings of full purple moons and multicolored stars on streets and driveways, clusters of houses with pots of blooming moonflowers sitting on their porches for what Hyunjin explained was symbolism of the moon. They passed by

groups just like theirs dressed to the nines in all kinds of ghostly fashions, all getting drawn in one direction.

Already, they could hear the rhythmic thud of loud music coming from the streets ahead, one massive heartbeat thudding through gravel, and they were about to reach its center. With every corner they turned and street they crossed, the sound grew louder, crowds thicker, voices of hundreds gathered in one spot. There was too much of it to yet make out just one song, but if one listened hard enough, they could hear *"Are we crazy, living our lives through a lens*,*" playing through an army of stereos.

"Check out the list of requests I made," Hyunjin murmured to Jisung, pulling up his phone. "How many d'you think I'll get through this year?"

"Last year you managed over five. Considering these are actually good, I'd take my chances."

"So comfortable, we're living in a bubble, bubble,"

"So comfortable, we cannot see the trouble, trouble,"

From the open windows of their apartment complexes, a flurry of asteriae threw clouds of glitter in the air to settle over passing crowds below.

"Moon dust," Chan explained. "Serves as sort of a blessing before we get to the celebration."

Jeongin dusted off particles on the shoulder of his knit purple daisy sweater and blew it at Seungmin's nose, laughing as he sneezed. Changbin giggled at them over his shoulder, spared a glance at Felix, who held the moondust on his palm up to the light, where it shone.

As they turned the corner, two girls- a rainbow crow with flowing dark hair in multicolored undercut and a chakora with a bejeweled nose

chain - jumped out the window of a brownstone hand in hand and landed on the pavement faces painted with constellations and moon phases. Up ahead, lights were flashing, bodies dancing and thriving to the music, the whole street packed with a party.

"So put your rose-colored glasses on,"

"Gentlemen, I give you," Minho said as they crossed the last street up to Main Street, "Ostara."

"And party on,"

Now, Eldritch at night was nothing new to them. It was a time where humans went to sleep in their own diurnally scheduled manner and the monsters went to play, making the darkness their own.

But under the life of Ostara, the town had become a different place, became transported. Instead of separating species, the celebration had brought out *everyone*- monsters, humans, being who were rarely seen all week finally slipping out the door and delving into the thick of it, a whole population moon drunk and uninhibited. The charge in the air had unfiltered, electrified. With every minute that inched closer to the witching hour, what had once been a small town, off-the-road pit stop had become something purely, truly *eldritch*.

"Turn it up, it's your favorite song,"

"Dance, dance, dance to the distortion,"

Golden twinkle lights were strung over telephone wires crossing the sky. Shop lights were on and doors were open, food carts rolled out right next to them. People with food and drinks in hand bumped shoulders, swayed to the beat. In the center, a satyr was manning the DJ booth, working the crowd, bopping along to the tune with the rest of them. As if in response, the moonlight seemed to persist beyond the clouds, the stars twinkling shining abnormally bright.

"Awesome," Felix breathed out in wonder.

"I wonder if this was what the Renaissance looked like," pondered Seungmin.

"Only had to wait thirty years this time around," mused Jisung. "But it was worth it."

"I suppose a tour is in order for the first half of tonight," Chan said, sending knowing looks at Seungmin, Felix, and Jeongin. "You guys have a lot to learn."

The 'tour' was much less a tour than the eight of them making their rounds, spotting friends in the masses dressed up in their cosmological finest, complimenting outfits that definitely would have never seen the light of the outdoors had the lunar report not come in last month. They were mostly gathered by an elongated picnic table filled with a collection of 'offerings,' since the four senior roommates had neglected to mention the party was also a potluck.

"But we didn't bring anything," pointed out Jeongin.

"Yes, we did," answered Minho, opening another one of his cosmic voids to the main room pantry back at Levanter, pulling out a tin of brownies. "Ta-da!"

"*That's* why you asked me to bake them?" Felix asked. The djinn shrugged innocently. "I hate you. If you'd have told me about this sooner, I could have doubled the recipe!"

"Holy *shit*, you didn't tell me you guys did mooncake specials on Ostara!" Chan shouted over the noise to Jiwoo, who merely laughed at his distress. "I was here to see you *open*!"

"Tell Hyejoo to leave some out in a box for us when we swing by," said Jisung, patting his shoulder. "And be sure to add some of those canelés too."

Going further downtown, it was easy to see how the effect of Ostara made it more than just one kind of party. On the top right, a crew of

modern-day Beatniks were reciting an odd mix of Shakespeare poetry and Dead Poets Society quotes in a circle like it was they were the next Poet Laureates. Meanwhile, on the far left, the madremonite of Alejandra's greenhouse had brought a boombox onto her balcony and had proceeded to blast Suavemente to the partiers below, inciting a dance off consisting of an hombre caiman and a jiaolong, the watching audience screaming, "*Besame!*" perfectly on beat.

"It's like if A Midsummer Night's Dream took LSD," Seungmin mused.

"For the most part, that's kind of what it is," agreed Hyunjin.

"Hey, look!" Felix pointed over their heads. In a white wheel cart, a girl with dyed silver hair was waving back. "Isn't that the boba place you guys were talking about?"

Before Jisung could tell him yes, Jeongin had seized hold of Seungmin's arm. "Say no more!" Before the werewolf boy could protest, he dragged him off to the cart. "See you guys!"

In the center square, the DJ had cued up Chaka Khan, which drew a new roar of approval from the crowd.

Minho laced his hand through Chan's. "I think that's our cue to go."

"Bin, you coming with?" Chan asked.

"I'll let you guys have your fun," Changbin promised. "But I'll see how long I can last on my own."

The three of them dove separately into the writhing street, one as a pair, the other flying solo.

"Well, Lix, guess that leaves you with us," said Jisung, draping his arm around the angel's right shoulder. "Unless you have any complaints?"

"None at all," Felix replied. "Although I did overhear something about azoth shots that piqued my curiosity."

"Such will only be one part of one glorious night," proclaimed Hyunjin, positioning himself by Felix's left shoulder. "Onward, lusty gentlemen. We have a party to crash."

"Okay, Romeo Montague," Jisung sniped under his breath.

"Jisung, get off my dick."

"Isn't that where you want-"

"Jesus *Christ*," Felix said in between them.

The night spiraled on in a whirlwind of glitter and pounding music. On the sidewalks, Jeongin struck up an animated conversation with the boba cart nephele about the world's misplaced hatred of strawberry milk tea while Seungmin jumped out the way of a duppy careening down the street, the bun-and-cheese platter in his hand presumably stolen. Churros in hand, Hyunjin and Jisung took turns babbling to Felix about the history of the marionberry (something about an epimeliad forgetting to bring something to the potluck and panicking so hard she crossed two different kinds of blackberries by accident) while the angel tried to absorb it the best he could.

On the streets, however, was where the center of life was, one haphazard neon arrow shot through the heart of the DJ booth, spilling over with people scream-singing, "*Ain't nobody loves me better*,"* bubbled with dance circles that never stayed empty for less than five seconds. In one, Minho and Chan were doing what they did best, keeping all eyes on them while reserving their own for each other, Minho spinning Chan under his arm and grinning as the vampire reeled him in by the sway of his waist, both of them laughing through, "*Makes me happy, makes me feel this way*."

In another, Changbin putting his solo act front and center, tearing it up in his own little pocket of space loyally provided by a cheering

audience of beings both human and monstrous, all just as appreciative. Maybe some had seen him in the ring and were comparing it to the same boisterous, rowdy energy they saw now, channeled into sharp, powerful moves that sparked darkness in the heels of his boots and the tips of his fingers. But if that was what they were paying attention to, there was no way they saw his eyes slip through the crowd at the end of the first verse, trailing after someone who glowed in every light that shone down on him.

"Ain't nobody loves me better than you..."

Flash two hours later, and the song of the night had buoyed back from last year's radio replay to early 2000's pop to an electric series of crowd pleasers before settling back into the lover's lane with none other than Ariana Grande herself, which had everybody out on the floor grabbing a partner in seconds.

*"I love the way you make me feel, I love it, I love it,"**

"I love the way you make me feel, I love it, I love it,"

While the rest of the street hollered, *"I'm thinking 'bout her every second, every hour, do my singing in the shower, picking petals off of flowers like,"* the sidewalk bobbed pleasantly by humming, *"Do she love me, do she love me not?"* both balancing the other out.

"You know, it is truly astounding to me," Jeongin said around a mouthful of the guava quesitos he'd picked up from the potluck table. "How do the people out there *not* get tired? In the time since we got here, I haven't seen one person leave the floor."

"What's astounding to me is how you've already moved on to your dessert portion," Seungmin countered, gesturing to his sweet-filled plate with his own half-full taro milk tea. "Do you even chew before you swallow?"

"Aw, Minnie, am I going too fast for you?"

"You go too fast for anyone."

"I suppose it's a special quality of mine," Jeongin replied airily, popping another pastry in his mouth. "Or maybe just a sign that everyone else should try more to keep up."

Seungmin chuckled. "I've been trying for years, in case you haven't noticed."

"Welp, then one of these days, you're gonna have to use that trump card you've been saving, because I'm not willing to believe it's your best." Before the werewolf could ask what he meant, Jeongin gasped. "Oh my God. Look!"

He pointed out into the revolving street crowd, where he could make out a near imperceptible flash of dark brown and purple whirling around each other in a horde of star-patterned clothes. "It's Chan and Minho!"

Seungmin craned his neck, trying to spot them around the people. "Y'know, I should be surprised, considering Minho refuses to do anything but void himself downtown because apparently it isn't worth his effort, but considering it's the two of them, I-" Jeongin had disappeared down the sidewalk, not even leaving behind a trail of dust. "Hey, wait up!"

By the time he found him, Jeongin was already scoping through the sidewalk crowd, clambering over windowsills, peering over heads, asking vendors if he could stand on their carts. "What are you *doing?*" asked Seungmin.

"Trying to get a good vantage point," Jeongin replied, not even phased. "Someone has to film this historical event."

Seungmin watched him stand back to examine the brick wall before them, fingers wiggling, like he was trying to see what kind of footholds he could find if he climbed it. *Guess I can spare one burst*

of speed. "I'll boost you up on my shoulders if you give me the strawberry cinnamon roll."

Jeongin swiveled his head around, something adjacent to amused surprise on his face. A fox's grin pulled up his lips. "Now we're talking."

The street party bobbed in waves to the chorus, partners drawing each other in close to the stereo lyrics. Not even pretending to dance anymore, Minho slipped his arms around his partner's neck, Chan's hands drifting south to rest on his hips, moving them in time to the beat as they sang the words low into the halfway between them; *"I love the way you make me feel, I love it, I love it,"*

"Baby, I love the way, oh, I love the way,"

"The way I love you,"

The touring trio watched from the outskirts of the sidewalk, trying to pick out a good opening to jump in. Well, Felix was- HyunSung were arguing over much more pressing matters.

"Ravens are only popular because of Teen fucking Titans," Hyunjin was saying. "A crow actually remembers faces. It could peck out your eye if it had enough spite stored up."

"Which is why I don't allow them in my hospice," Jisung fired back. "One tried to attack Milo because he stepped on its nest by accident- it was built in front of a water fountain! Not in it. *In front* of it."

"The fuck is a Milo?"

"The goat I found running away from the country fair! He's just a baby. The ravens sing to him sometimes to help him sleep."

"I didn't know ravens could sing."

"They can mimic human voices, I guess enough to get mine down. Cool Bird Fact."

"I'm sorry, and that- that does not concern you *how*? Your very presence could be replaced by a group of twenty-four-inch-tall black birds who mockingjayed your voice..."

Felix tuned them out, peering into the shifting crowds. Everyone else seemed so lost in themselves, so unaware that there was a life outside of this one. *Maybe Eldritch really is another planet*, he mused. It sure had felt that way for the past twenty-seven years.

A roar went up from one of the dance circles. Felix followed the sound, expecting to see Minho and Chan resurface from yet another epic finale move, but it wasn't them. Instead, it was Changbin cackling into the night sky, triumphant like he'd just won a match, movements rippling in time with the music.

He'd told them enough about the dances he'd go to in the 50's - so much that he couldn't bring up any more without Seungmin throwing some inconsequential object at his face - the blaring rock, the big band, the nights that made the long, long days all worth it. *I wonder if he always burned this bright*, Felix thought, watching him like a comet hitting the ground. *If I'll ever get tired of seeing it.*

"Wow."

The red cup in his hand cracked in the center. Hyunjin and Jisung were staring at him like they knew exactly what he was. "Okay, whatever either of you are thinking, do not say it."

But Jisung chuckled, shaking his head. "Felix, if you wanted to get out on the floor, all you had to do was say so," Hyunjin told him.

"I- you guys were busy! I was willing to wait."

The spriggan and siren met one another's eyes behind him. "*Truce*," they announced, and went back to him.

"Yeah, we're going," Jisung said. He yelled over the noise: "Hey, Seungmin! Jeongin!"

From the streetlight where they'd taken their position, they looked around. Seungmin still had a smudge of strawberry frosting on his upper lip, and, seated on his shoulders, Jeongin still had his phone out and filming. "We're a little busy here!"

"Tonight is no night for work," declared Hyunjin, replacing Felix's drink with his right hand as Jisung grabbed the angel's left. "We're going out as a coven, and that includes you two."

"But my strawberry-"

"Leave it, Min. We're dancing."

"Noooo," they whined, but still Jeongin let himself be pulled off by the roots Jisung summoned to bring him to the ground, grabbed Seungmin's hand to pull him stumbling along, linked themselves to Jisung.

"Wait!" Felix let go of Hyunjin's hand, grabbing his drink he'd abandoned on a cafe table. Downing the contents, he threw it in the nearest recycling bin. "Right. Let's go."

"Onward!" Hyunjin bellowed, and pulled the chain into the raucous streets, making straight for the center, where the dance circles had closed in on themselves and revealed the rest of their members amongst the crowds.

Chan spotted them first; his Spidey-senses never let them get away with anything. He whooped loud enough to momentarily cut through the music, alerting Minho that they were no longer alone, a reality he only sarcastically mourned with a roll of his eyes over a smile. From a crack in the ground, Jisung called up a root from the ground to tap Changbin on the shoulder and spin him around. What he faced was a mess of peace signs, finger guns, and jazz hands that were all far too passionate to be fully ironic coming from a group of beings who he'd seen so often the muscle memory that caused the grin on his face didn't even have a job anymore.

Still, it was Felix that his eyes rested on, like he was all he'd needed to see. "Nice of you to finally drop in," he said, voice gone tinny through the third verse.

"Didn't know I was missed," Felix replied. It was easier now, given he was right in front of him.

"Well, it gets pretty tiring when you can see only two people you know, and they're too busy with each other to pay any attention to you." Now, those two people were occupied- Chan and Jisung with a rapid-fire battle of shuffle combinations too fast for the eye to follow, Minho teaching Seungmin a variation of a two step, and Hyunjin and Jeongin with a freestyle that truly couldn't be put into words. "So much for the company."

Judging from the grin dimpling his features, he didn't seem to mind. But Felix, who'd been standing on the sidelines long enough and was beginning to think that the azoth was somewhere in the cup of potluck punch he'd just finished, decided to take a step further. "I'm here," he said. "Is that not enough for you?"

Changbin glanced at him dubiously with amusement. "I never said *that*."

"Well, I certainly didn't enjoy the implication."

"And who missed who, now?"

Felix laughed; this close, Changbin could probably smell the punch on his breath. "I guess we could leave that up to interpretation."

The demon's smile grew at the answer. This close, Felix could see the light sheen of sweat on his skin, the flush on his neck, moon dust still dappling his skin. *There aren't enough Hail Mary's in the world to eradicate this kind of beautiful*, thought Felix. No wonder he made it out of Hell.

"Y'know," he started, sidling closer as the third verse drew to a close. "You've been out here for a while, yet I haven't seen you take one partner."

Changbin eyed the toe of his sneaker next to his. "Some things can be done alone."

"Sure, *sure*, big scary demon." It wasn't like he'd been in want of one; he'd had admirers trailing his back since they entered Main Street. On a night like this, someone was bound to take a chance- right now, Felix didn't see why that someone couldn't be him. "Thing is, I didn't come all this way out here just to watch."

When Changbin's eyes slipped up to his, it was a challenge, a search for a tell. "Are you asking me to dance with you, sunshine?"

Finally, he gets it. "Well, if you're offering."

Of course, the first thing he did was laugh- no, not laugh, *giggle* in that way he did only when he was flustered. "Come on, you don't want that."

"Um, yes I *do*. You're amazing."

"I'm a solo act for a reason- I'm too rusty to be any good to you."

"Then we'll dust it off together!"

"Come on, you spent almost the entirety of the 70's in New Orleans! People got rhythm there." A little more quietly, he added, "'Sides. I'm sure you could find someone better."

I don't want someone else. But this Felix didn't say. "Are you really going to leave me hanging on the most important night in Eldritch history?"

He held out a hand for him to take. The rest of the world could watch from the background.

"What do you say?"

If he was going by the way Changbin looked at him, the demon probably thought he was drunk off the entire punch bowl (which was only at the very least one-eighth of a truth). If he were a stranger, he would've already brushed him off by now.

But in the smirk that won over his skepticism- the look that had probably gotten him killed all those years ago -Felix saw nothing but victory.

Changbin took his hand and drew him in close, chest to chest, so fast his heartbeat zipped in catching up. "I'm all yours, angel."

"So don't you worry, baby you got me,"

And that, Felix thought, as the prechorus crept in and Hyunjin smacked Chan's shoulder and pointed right at them, had to be the best music he'd heard all night.

They spun out on *"I got a bad boy, I must admit it,"* and just like that they were off- whirling, pivoting, connected always by a hand and a razor sharp gaze, shoes scuffing over the asphalt. It was something of a combination of what you'd see in 50's sock hops and 70's clubs modified to fit with the music of the twenty-first century, two decades of revelry, transposed over one another in the present. Somehow, by some kind of magic which neither of them knew, swing and Chicago steps just worked like that.

The crowd around them roared the way it had for Minho and Chan, clearing out space for them, cheering them on.

"You got my heart, don't know how you did it,"

"People are watching," Felix noted as they drew in for what he distantly remembered as a coaster step.

"That must mean we're good," Changbin replied. They giggled at the mischief they found in each others' eyes and spun out again.

"And I don't care who sees it, babe,"

"I don't wanna hide the way I feel when you're next to me,"

They should have been dizzy, or breathless, or scared they'd trip over some beastly little pothole in the ground, but it felt as if both of them were floating on the feeling of vertigo, flashing their feet over thin air. Every time they returned to one another, the lead switched around, trust that the other would be able to follow.

Through a crooning chorus of, *"I love the way you make me feel,"* Felix brought him in with a slow-spinning right turn so close it felt almost like a waltz, devoid of the fear that had kept him stuck by the curb. In return, Changbin reeled him into a lively anchor step that picked up the pace with the song. Wherever his 'rust' was, it hadn't made an appearance. *"Baby, I love the way,"*

Even with the rest of their coven watching like it was a before-midnight special and the entire rest of the town howling like wolves, it didn't matter. They could have been anywhere, a ballroom, a street intersection, the clouds or the underground, and all of it still would have been numbed down to the warmth of two palms over another, soft eyes and golden smiles that hadn't vanished for the entirety of the number.

"Oh, I love the way,"

"The way I love you,"

It was possible that Felix still had some flight left in him, or that they had quite literally started floating, but the dance ended with him tornadoing into Changbin's arms, both of them cackling shamelessly, feet barely touching the ground.

"I knew it," Felix giggled, vining his arms around his neck for stability. "You were holding out on me."

Changbin laughed- not the bashful kind, the real kind, the one that Hyunjin and Jeongin and everyone else teased the hell out of, but Felix loved whenever he heard it. "Surprise."

Their breaths came in flimsy puffs of laughter, crystallized in the air between them, until all that remained were the smiles on their faces, still flushed and half-delirious, coming back down to earth. When they arrived, the music had faded to white noise. Felix's arms were still resting loosely on broad shoulders. Changbin's hands had found the angel's waist, fingers brushing the small of his back as they pressed into corduroy. Black was brushing strands of blond, and yet they knew they could be closer. They had always known, really- all the years they'd lived together, the jobs they'd endured, the jokes they'd swapped and created, wishing there could be more. It wasn't the first time they had been this close, the first time they'd thought, *what if?*, yet the moon was shining, the party had fallen away, and on a night this full of magic, it couldn't be ignored.

Felix's cheeks had gone rosy from the cold, making his freckles stand out even more. This close to demon who'd escaped the depths of hell with greaser's uniform and a spitfire temper, he felt like he'd swallowed the coals. This close, and Changbin's breaths were still pushing at the hollow of his throat, his hair a windblown mess of glitter and product, eyes dark and fixed wholly on him, but in his arms was still the safest Felix had ever felt, even years later. He couldn't even begin to imagine how he had anything to do with darkness when he was so full of light.

I can't, they thought.

But God, if he'd let me.

Felix was about three semisolid inches away from opening his stupid mouth and saying something even stupider to risk it all when the

song crossfaded into the intro of another, all delicate keyboard tones and soft harmonies from another decade.

*"I know your eyes in the morning sun,"**

The words stuck in his throat, holding back air. F45 on the jukebox.
Oh, no.

"I feel you touch me in the pouring rain..."

"Felix?" Changbin asked, but his voice sounded a million miles away, a radio speaker drowned out by feedback. "You okay?"

But Felix couldn't even nod in return; all motion had been confined to his heartbeat, slamming hard and quick against bone, too fast for him to count. He was drowning in the sound, the memory, the transposed film of then over now. He was only vaguely aware of the tremors in his hands, his mind going blurry and taking his vision with it. Somewhere, in the remains of a bar long since repurposed, Eric hummed the lyrics in his ear, chin notched over his shoulder, holding him the way somebody else was right now.

Changbin stared up at him, brows furrowed, eyes blown wide with worry. *He looked at me like that too.* And here Felix was, still thinking about it today. What had he been *thinking?*

"Felix, are you alright?"

"And you come to me, on a summer breeze,"

He wanted to answer, but his breaths were coming short and quick, like all the air in his body was fighting to leave at once. His arms dropped limply out of their hold around Changbin, who released him in turn out of confusion, concern. *He cares so much,* Felix thought as the lyrics warped in his ears, transformed into fog. *I didn't deserve it then, and I don't now.* Not when all he did was hurt them, anyways.

Shaking, Felix mumbled what he hoped sounded like an apology and turned around, stumbling away like a drunken fugitive caught in the act, eyes shut to the rest of the world, trying to do the same with the rest of his senses.

"And it's me you need to show, how deep is your love?"

The chorus followed him like graveyard ghouls; Felix clapped his hands over his ears to shut out the noise. The ragged drag of his own heaving breaths seeped through his fingers, and he dropped them to push through the sidewalk crowd, find purchase on the walls leading out of the party and into the alleyway, scrape past trash cans and affronted raccoons until they discovered a spot against plastered walls covered by shadows and nighttime, far enough away from the world to hide him from it.

Felix collapsed on the ground like a stray dog after a beating, hands over his heart, his ears, his head, knowing that it was panic, just panic and nothing more, but the knowledge didn't slow his heart rate or turn down the music or bring him back to life. *Breathe, dammit, breathe.* In and out. In and out. Chan had taught it to him half a dozen times, it couldn't be hard.

But the tremors would stop, no matter how hard he squeezed his fists. The vice around his lungs only tightened with every breath he took.

He hadn't heard the footsteps- all Felix could comprehend were the hands that hadn't been there before gripping his shoulders, both firm and careful. "Hey. You're okay. I got you."

"I- I-I don't- I can't *breathe*-"

"Yes, you can." Slowly, Felix's hands uncurled. One was taken by another and held tight. "Just listen to me, okay?"

His insides felt like Pop Rocks. Felix didn't believe him. But still, he stammered out, "Okay."

"Okay. Good. Now, I want you to breathe in. Just try your best."

Try. Try. The least he could do was try. Try to breathe in through his nose, just as much as his body would allow, hold it.

"Now let go." He did. "Breathe in." Inhale. "Breathe out." Exhale. "In." Inhale. "Out." Exhale.

After three times more, the ground began to settle, heart rate slowed to a steady rhythm, air flowed freely once more. The last exhale released the tension in his shoulders, closed his eyes, tipped his head back against the wall. All Felix could hear was laughter from another plane. The worst was over.

Opening his eyes, they latched instantly onto the hand that still held his, followed the arm up to where Changbin sat beside him, looking like he'd just seen someone rise from a coma. The smile he gave to him had no pity, just relief. "Hey."

"Hey." With his sight gradually streaming back into the present, he could see how far he'd run: almost two full streets down from Main. "Shit. Shit, I'm-"

"No, shut up, don't say sorry. You got nothing to apologize for."

Wearily, Felix shut up. He slipped his hand out of his grasp, tucked his knees up into his chest. "So, did the others-"

"Yeah. They got pretty worried, but figured a search party would be a little too much, so. I kinda volunteered." He nodded, still too sheepish to be anything else. "Was everything okay out there?"

No. "Yeah. Fine, just, you didn't- you weren't supposed to see it."

"I'm glad I did." Changbin drew back, hesitating. "Was... was it something I did, or-"

"No! No, no, no, no. It wasn't. Really. I mean-" His face faltered. "Yeah. No. It wasn't you. It was just- it was the song."

The hurt turned to confusion. "The Bee Gees?"

"Yeah. Well, kind of. It's just-" *How do I explain this?* "It's a long story."

Changbin glanced up at the stars, vacant of any artifice. "I got the time."

Something told Felix he wasn't getting out of this easy. He tried to laugh him off. "Come on. And leave the party by itself?"

"It'll still be there when I get back. If, I can wait a couple dozen years again." Changbin shrugged. "I just want to make sure you'll be back there with me."

He'd only been out there for a couple of hours. *The others will want to see you,*" Felix considered. He could wait a minute, get himself together, then go back out and show them they had nothing to worry about. He could even try dancing again.

But when he closed his eyes, Eric was still there, sitting across from him on a bar stool that someone always saved, laughing at something he said, looking at him like there was no one else he would rather look at, and it felt like the first days all over again. *I don't know if I can face the present again just yet.*

Changbin was still there with him, waiting for his cue. "You don't have to stay here."

A wry smile plucked at the corner of his mouth. "I know," the demon replied. "But if you want me to, I can."

In the shadows, Changbin was beautiful. Solid and stable and there because he wanted to be. Felix wasn't sure he would ever deserve it.

"Stay."

And he did. And when he asked Felix about the song, he told him about Eric.

"It was my first day in New Orleans- 1976. Before, I'd only ever watched the world from above, what was going on, what people did. I was curious, and. Well, the same-old same-old up in heaven wasn't getting any more interesting, so I took the first chance I got. And, when I got there..." *Enchanté*. "He was the first person I met."

"Aw."

"Yeah, he stopped me from getting hit by a car. *And* it was raining." In spite of or because of the sarcasm, Changbin angled himself towards him, chin in the palm of his hand. "He was more than just the first human I ever met. He was the first being I ever got to really *know*, the way you learn about someone and start to care for them and keep coming back. Before, I... I never had that. I wasn't allowed to feel anything like that. It just wasn't my place." He didn't say a word, just nodded, understanding the feeling. "I used to sneak down every day to see him, as long as I could. I wasn't really missed, so it was easy. It was so simple- we were just spending the days together in the city, roaming around, doing what normal people did. He didn't know I was an angel. Never knew how special he was to me, not really, but." The lyrics were coming back to him, this time in Eric's voice. "God, he was radiant."

"What was he like?"

Felix chuckled; he'd never been able to forget. "Reckless. Creative. Handsome, funny. Always determined to make things right." He snuck a peek at Changbin, who'd been hanging on like every word mattered. "You remind me of him."

This struck a surprised smile out of him. "I do?"

"Yeah, you do. Same stubbornness, horrible sense of humor. Got into a fight with the corner store guy once for selling ham and bananas hollandaise instead of hot dogs. Even the same music

taste." A smile of his own broadened as the memories came back, golden from sepia and sentiment. "He loved music. Went to school for it, played at clubs, for anyone who would listen. Somebody always would." *Keep me warm with your love, then you softly leave.* "The song that was playing earlier was the one he sang the night he kissed me for the first time. Ever since then, I've never been able to hear it without thinking of him. Usually, it doesn't get that bad, but..." Changbin's expression was dawning on concern again. Felix couldn't bring himself to continue the sentence; he wouldn't be able to come back from it. "He taught me everything there was to know about humanity, about life, and love, and pain, what it meant to experience all of it, and he didn't even know. It was just us. It didn't have to be anything more." The smell of gasoline dripping from someone's car stabbed a prick in his throat. "It wasn't supposed to change."

They both waited for his voice to even out. "What happened to him?" Changbin asked softly.

For a moment, he stopped. He didn't know how to start. He didn't know if he could go on.

Felix swallowed, the tang of blood and smoke cutting down his throat.

"It didn't start out as a riot."

La Merveille was a bar in the French Quarter- one of the best places for anyone who needed somewhere to belong. A welcome escape from the summer heat, drinks were always flowing, and music never stopped. It was the last place Felix would go every night. With Eric, he learned the name of every bartender and regular, where to hit the jukebox when the song hit a snag, how to move his feet to the hits of every genre. In time, people would come to expect him, wave when he came in, pour an automatic French '75 whenever he sat down at the bar.

"All the things you're supposed to feel about a home, I felt them there," Felix said, voice trembling on shaky ground. "*There*, I felt like

someone."

It had been a night just like any other- then the police came in. The laughter ceased in an instant, snuffed out like a candle. The front and back doors had been blocked off, there was no getting in or out. Orders were barked at bartenders to drop their hands. People were hauled off the dance floor and away from their partners. Bodies were thrust out of seats and onto the ground and still, people were told to get on their feet and not move a muscle while tables were overturned, drinks were sniffed, and clothes were patted down while any suspicious characters were questioned. Eric had pushed Felix behind him; he could still remember his grip around the racing pulse of his wrist.

"When they brought out cuffs and started grabbing people, we shouted at them. Protesting, yelling at them to stop. Someone threw a bottle, and someone else hit a cop, and just like that, it started."

Felix wanted to help- after all the years he'd spent sitting around, watching it happen from the clouds, he wanted to do *something* -but Eric dragged him out; the cops had started shooting, chairs were being thrown- things had escalated way too fast.

There was a broken window in the beer storage room. He'd managed to edge behind the bar and was motioning for Eric come with him, but he hesitated. The foolish, kindhearted mortal he was- he looked out at his room full of friends fighting for their lives and looked back at Felix and for a split second didn't know which was more worth fighting for.

"He was reaching to take my hand- I almost had him." Felix sniffed, flinched like he was hearing the gunshot again. "He was gone before I even touched him."

He had half expected Eric to get up, follow him back; he'd never seen anyone die before. But another shot followed; he was scared of seeing where it would hit next. One last glance at Eric's body, and he

fled back up to the clouds. It was the last time he saw anything of La Merveille.

"There was so much I didn't tell him. So much he should've known, so much we could've *done*." Changbin squeezed his hand, and he squeezed it back without thinking. "For days, I'd wonder if I'd do anything differently. If I'd just go back in time, change my mind, convince myself it wasn't worth it. It just hurt so bad." *One year of wonderful, and it was all it took to change everything I knew.* "But I would. Because he was."

The music pounded on from streets away; it could have been coming from another reality. He could feel the beat through the soles of his shoes, a heartbeat buried in the asphalt.

Changbin tipped the back of his head against the wall, like he'd lived Felix's past through his words. "I s'pose that's the problem with being immortal," he said. "You live too damn long."

A mirthless excuse for a laugh puffed out of his lips. "Isn't that the truth."

"Really. I mean- even though it's just one life, it feels like a new one every time. A new stage, a new part as a new person. You start hoping you'll get it right, but you always end up doing it over again." He elbowed his arm. "I've lived a couple of my own. Trust me, no one's safe from heartbreak."

"Right." First was the 50's, then hell, then Eldritch, if his memory serves right. "I'm dealing with an expert here."

A finger gun popped the brick wall before them. "That you are, sunshine."

Three whole lifetimes. By some odd coincidence, he'd stumbled upon the right person to talk to. "Shit, you got a whole trilogy on me."

Changbin guffawed. "A *trilogy*?"

"Yeah, a three-parter, that's you!"

"Never thought of it like that," he murmured, genuinely shook. "Holy shit, you're *right*."

"Of course I am," Felix replied, with the air of a bravado that barely held the weight of what he'd just revealed. *Ask him*. "What's your secret?"

"Huh?"

"How do you take it? I mean, day after day, I just- I see you going around, all this past behind you, and you act like it's nothing. How did you get over it?"

Changbin blinked. "'Over it,'" he echoed, switching his gaze to his knees, covered by faded blue jeans. "Whenever I think I am, I still end up seeing my family's faces on strangers I pass on the street. I'll go to sleep, dream of hell, and wake up feeling like I never left." He chuckled. "Truth is, I don't think it's ever something you leave behind. It's life you lived. You just learn to bear it."

He'd had years of practice; there was enough evidence of it in the grate of his voice. "How did you do it?"

The edge of his mouth tugged up in the tiniest smirk. "I did what you did," the demon replied. "I got back up again, moved past it. Tried to focus on the life I'm living now. Not to leave everything behind, but to use what I learned from it in the now. It doesn't mean I cared any less about what happened, or who I loved then, but that I didn't live through it just to slog through another chance I got to do more."

When he put it like that, it sounded so simple. "Is that what I've been doing?"

"Yeah, you ditz." He dodged the punch Felix aimed at his shoulder. "What else would you be doing here, at the biggest soirée in Eldritch? You're living. You're making the most out of it."

Felix bit his lip through a smile. "You know I'm gonna put soirée on your list, right?"

"I/- fuck it. Fine." He hummed triumphantly. "But you see what I mean?"

"Yeah, yeah." *Still*. "But it's been over forty years since I lost Eric. Shouldn't I be over that by now?"

"Well, it makes sense to me," Changbin shrugged. "You loved him. You lost him too soon, and you didn't know you would. With him, you lost a whole world you'd only just started to know. To just be over it would mean you were just passing through."

Instead, I took it to heart. Carved it into a bar top and gave it a name, a face, and the sweetest killer smile. "The pain's never gonna go away, is it?"

Changbin's eyes dimmed. "No," he said. "But I like to think that I'm lucky. To have had something that I still hold onto even when it's gone."

His words tasted like truth, something dulcet and familiar and final, the bullseye of a target Felix had been trying to arrive at all along. "Yeah." Only moments ago they'd been spinning in each others' arms; now, even with a hand's distance, they felt even closer. "Funny, I'm usually the one patching you up."

"Exactly. You've done it enough for me." Changbin winked, a dream boy in a biker jacket. "Just thought I'd return the favor best I could."

Typical, Felix thought drowsily. He leaned his head on his shoulder, leather cool to the touch. "Thank you."

Changbin dropped his hand, instead looped an arm around his shoulder. "Anytime, sunshine."

Hyunjin found them like that- poking his head into the alley, eyes as big as a barnyard owl's. Changbin waved back at him, only calling him over when he got the okay from Felix. All it took was a yell from the siren to summon the rest of them: Chan from the shadow of a trash can, Minho from a void in the sky, Jisung root-vaulting over the whole building to get a running start, and fox form Jeongin dutifully following his nose with Seungmin on his tail.

"Holy shitballs thank God you're okay," Hyunjin blurted in one rambled exhale. "I've been running around *everywhere*. Way too much physical exertion."

"I appreciate the effort, Jin," Felix promised, giggling as Jeongin nosed his way into his arms. "Everything's okay now."

"He just needed some time outside of the crowd," Changbin assured the group.

Whether or not they really believed them, they left the topic untouched. The demon let go of Felix for Chan and Jisung to pull him to his feet into a double-sided, hair-ruffling hug. Outside in the real world, the party cheered with all thousand pairs of their hoarse lungs.

"We better get moving quick," Minho reported, a knowing smile on his face. "The first phase just began."

As they filed out of the alley, Felix squinted up at the moon. Beyond the telephone wires and twinkle lights, he could see the face of it changing color- a pale lavender haze overcast, a hue that seemed to draw in the stars. "And this is...?"

"Not the end of the world, just the start of a new chapter," Changbin finished, nodding him along over his shoulder. "Let's see if we can get some good seats."

"Why *running*," Hyunjin groaned, sluggish as a zombie who had used up all his energy rising from the grave. With a few energizing

finger guns of encouragement from Chan and a nip at his ankles from fox-form Jeongin, he managed to keep up with a jog.

The boys took to the sidewalks, weaving around couples and carts, jumping over motorcycles and car hoods, pausing every now and then to pick up discarded trash because a community blowout was no excuse to be a litterbug. Instead of the intersection on the dance floor where everyone else was gathering, where the DJ had turned down the chorus of Human Right* to start the countdown from twenty, the head of the chain lead them to the town library, almost at the very edge of the civilization.

"What're we doing here?" Felix asked.

"The perks of being friends with the mayor of the town," replied Minho, producing a ring of keys from his sleeve like a magician's card pack. "Long story short, I got an extra set. Now chop-chop, he just counted fifteen."

The djinn shepherded them in through the open door, snapping his fingers to pick up the pace, and slammed the door behind Seungmin and zapped it shut. Inside, the heather-hued moonlight filtered in through the outline of Gothic rose windows, lighting up the shadowy darkness in neat slashes. Their sprinting stampede of footsteps crashed in echoing waves on polished hardwood floors, the rows of couches and bookshelves making an eerily silent forest that smelled of mothballs and hastily sprayed pine freshener.

"There's something about this place," Felix murmured as they scurried up a spiral staircase. Supposedly, it lead to a rooftop entrance.

"What, reminds you of the last movie we watched?" Seungmin asked behind him. "Spoiler alert, it was Clue."

He was subtle for an eavesdropper, Felix would give him that. "No. It's more like... like deja vu, like I've done this before, even though I know I haven't."

A glowing surge of violet flooded the staircase. "Hey, sunshine."

Felix turned, and Changbin was leaning roguishly out the door to the rooftop, wreathed in sparkling lilac illumination, hand outstretched to him, looking like a dream Felix had had from another lifetime brought to earth by the stars. "You coming or what?"

"Make it quick," Seungmin added. "You're holding up the line."

Somehow, the memory didn't matter anymore. All Felix knew was the feeling, like slipping off the final step of the stairs and landing on something pillowy soft and dangerous, laughing gas and rose scent mixed together, but enough to keep him on steady ground. *And it comes not from then, but from now.* Nothing was going to keep him from this moment.

He grabbed hold of Changbin's hand and let him haul him up, where the rest of their friends were waiting in front of a purple moon.

It had been one thing to imagine it, but another entirely to see it for real. Suspended in near-midnight blue darkness, a sphere of scintillating amethyst in the dead center of the sky, born from the ancient ghoulish power that thrummed in the bedrock beneath the civilization below, all the way to the limits of Eldritch's shadiest groves, a concept which none of them would ever truly understand. Felix had been running all throughout the change of phases; he hadn't even seen them take effect.

"Just in time," Minho mused, checking a watch he didn't even have. Or need, for that matter- the DJ's countdown to midnight had just reached ten.

With a penthouse view of the whole town, the coven of Stray Kids looked out over a congregation of the weirdest, queerest, and Satan's dearest bopping their scaled, horned, multicolored heads to "*Baby don't fight, I wanna see you move tonight,*" all of them crammed together in a concert slash potluck slash dance party the size of a street, counting down as one from *five*.

"Four!"

"Three!"

"Two!"

"ONE!"

Violet radiation pulsed from the moon, and every star in the sky exploded.

When Felix's bearings came back to him, the detonation of screams and applause from every denizen in Eldritch who still had use of their voices filled his ears, the undercurrent of the final chorus turned up to a ear-violating volume. In his eyes, a shimmering sea of splintered neon fireworks, like every kaleidoscope in the world had been rocket launched into the atmosphere and smashed to bits, left to light up the night in spinning, shining, stunning brilliance.

The mortal veil, Felix remembered. This is what the sky looked like without it. This was the world. *This is Eldritch*.

"Did the moon just skadoosh?" Jeongin yelled over the noise.

"Jeongin, for fuck's sake, kid, just let us have this," Chan said, beaming like a shooting star.

"Turn off the lights," The Strike sang through the speakers, *"Dancing is a human right."*

And all around Felix, though neither could make a direct claim, his coven was taking advantage of it. Chan was pulling off some dad version of Grease's hand jive, Seungmin getting by with a helpless two step that crumbled to pieces when Jeongin seized his hands and spun him in a dizzy giggling circle. Changbin and Jisung had taken each other's hands and decided to see how well loosely-based salsa would fit with late 2010's alternative pop. Somewhere through the cacophony, his name was called, and Hyunjin yanked him grinning

by the arm into his and Minho's circle, and the night was danced away.

Brewing inside him was a feeling he'd felt before- not for the first time in Eldritch, but a feeling he'd felt so many times that he knew now what it meant. It was screaming the words to the song booming in the air with a group of people who knew the words by heart and still smiling when the lights were shut off. It was arriving late to the conversation and still having someone make room and fill you in. It was home, not just in a place, but a person- in this case, eight -and it was constant. They could go anywhere together, and that much would still be true.

The speakers blared out, "*Dancing is human*," to a modern day discotheque outro, and the group crashed into each other side by side, laughing like any party of occasionally stable, miscellaneous magical friends who had scaled the top of a local library would. For one night of beauty, chaos, and fluorescent Technicolor, it was something they could enjoy together.

Except when Felix glanced over his shoulder and caught Changbin looking at him instead, he felt something else, something different, just between the two of them; a brush of hands, gentle as a spark, almost like he could take flight again.

The Other Side - SZA, Justin Timberlake

*Chained To The Rhythm - Katy Perry, Skip Marley

*Ain't Nobody - Chaka Khan

*The Way - Ariana Grande

*How Deep Is Your Love - Bee Gees

*Human Right - The Strike

Part 3 - Heart Shaker

Chapter 28: Part 3 - Heart Shaker

And after a brief interval we are Back with a new third part of our journey, and I bet you can guess which duo it's going to take place around this time.

For this background chapter, we're opening in with how Felix came to find Levanter, and how the others came to feel about him.

,

,

You're my heart shaker, shaker

You're my heart shaker, shaker ...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Past - 1992

*"... my, my, at Waterloo, Napoleon did surrender,"**

"Oh, yeah,"

Kkami barked exactly twice, making Hyunjin look away from his work. "Was that on beat?" Kkami just smiled the way dogs did, with no thought or care or braincells to generate any intelligent thought. "I love you way more than I should."

Normally, any four of his roommates would have come storming into the forest clearing shouting just why the hell he'd stolen the main room radio when room 26's worked just fine, but the morning timestamp had passed over an hour ago, leaving nothing but cloudless blue skies, pleasant breezes, and a reliable stream of the 70's greatest hits.

At least to Hyunjin, it was one peaceful way to spend a Saturday evening.

Humming along to *"Waterloo, I was defeated you won the war,"* Hyunjin dipped his paintbrush back into his watercolors, deepening the hue of the pond he was replicating on a canvas. *"Waterloo, promise to love you forevermore."*

"Waterloo, couldn't escape if I wanted to,"

"Waterloo, knowing my fate is to be with you,"

He was just focusing on the finishing touches of the border, furrowing his brow at the shadow that had descended over the water- he'd *specifically* chosen today for clear weather -when the body that followed crashed into the pond.

Kkami shrieked, shooting up on his furry little feet as the contents of the pond came rushing out from all sides; the only reason why the whole ring wasn't drenched was because Hyunjin had collected enough of a moment's sense to sweep the water into a sphere above their heads.

The radio, knocked into a tree trunk, played happily on, completely thrown out of the mood. When Hyunjin lowered his hands, the water flowed back in around a young man clothed in white, spotless dress shirt, slacks, and shoes. Ice blonde hair floated around his face, framing closed eyes and softly carved bone structure relaxed in unconsciousness.

Hyunjin couldn't do much to pick his jaw up off the grass other than peek up at the sky and check if The Weather Girls' 1983 prophecy had come true, look down at Kkami to see if any of the thoughtless wisdom living in his pebble of a mind could generate an explanation for what had just happened, look back at his full-bodied interruption floating serenely in the pond.

"What the *fuck*."

Once he'd shoved his easel, canvas, and supplies back into his closet, Hyunjin put himself through the admirable effort of carrying the man out of the forest and up the hill to the main room, Kkami following behind as moral support. Or coaching. Or criticism. Either one worked.

"I'm fucking *trying, okay*," Hyunjin hissed, straining against the weight he was dragging uphill. Reaching the top of the hill at the sparring ground, he looked out over the landscape. "*Guys!*"

Jisung poked his head out of his garden, a blue speck emerging from a cage of strangler figs. "What?"

"*I found a body!*"

"You *what?*" This had come from above- Chan peeking down from the second the second floor rooftop, a marked book in his hand.

Hyunjin lifted one of the young man's hands in a wave. "*This.*"

Chan found Jisung's eyes across the field, looking for some extra information on how this had come to be, answered only with a shrug. "Do you want us to help you hide it?" asked Jisung.

"No, I- It-" If Hyunjin spent any longer holding up a comatose life form, he was going to collapse. "He fell from the sky!"

"He what?"

The main room coffee table was swept clear of any contents, and the stranger was laid carefully atop it.

Chan stepped back, hands on his hips to complete a perplexed thinking pose. "So. You're saying he just... fell into the pond?"

"Yes, as I have said three times now, and yet neither of you saw. You're telling me you heard nothing? No big bang?" Both shook their heads. "*Jesus.* What were you guys even doing?"

Jisung shrugged. "The garden needed mulch."

"Winter reading for book club," answered Chan. "Don't know who this Stephen King guy is, or why he's writing about psychic teenage girls, but I guess everyone else thinks he's relevant right now."

Bam! The front door slammed into the wall so forcefully another shove could have blown it off the hinges.

"I don't think any of you know how stressful it is to drive an agropelter out of Lake Oswego," Minho ranted, blazing into the main

room, "but if you are literally surrounded by trees, awake because of a shitty cup of instant black and a protein bar, and the only motivation is another month's payment of the mortgage, then let me tell you, it is *nowhere* near as rewarding as it sounds-"

"And *who* in the nine rings is on our coffee table?" interrupted Changbin, letting the duffel bag on his shoulder slump to the floor.

"Finally, *someone's* on topic here," Hyunjin sighed as they made for the living room. "Meet our newest patron- dropped in from the heavens."

"We're not exactly sure what he is," Jisung rambled as Changbin crouched down to study their guest. "At first we were thinking a human that got in a skydiving accident-"

"- then we realized if he was human he'd be dead," continued Chan.

"And he isn't," concluded Hyunjin. "So we're thinking he might be a nephele, or a fae, or-"

"An angel," Changbin murmured.

Chan chuckled. "I know Jin said he was from the heavens, but-"

"Not figuratively, you dishrag. Look." He beckoned them into a circle around the table. "Sure, there's the looks-" Snickers from the cluster. "But there's everything that goes with it. When's the last time you saw hair this color and it wasn't a bottle job?"

"That's true, we did check the roots," Jisung muttered in agreement.

"I guess God would be the only one to give his employees a uniform that bland," Hyunjin amended.

"Exactly. And look at his face. Those aren't just freckles- they're markings. Look at the ones that stand out the most." The arrangement started at the ridge of his left cheekbone, crossed over

the bridge of his nose to the right, dots connected by an invisible line. "It makes a pattern."

"Virgo constellation," Minho recognized. "Meaning servant." He peered closer. "But it's been covered up by others."

"Which suggests that maybe there was a reason he fell."

"Gotta say, I am loving the symbolism we're getting here," quipped Jisung.

"Which you got from staring at the guy's face, which somehow isn't the gayest thing to happen around here," snarked Hyunjin.

"How do you know all this anyway?" asked Chan. "I thought you dealt with seraphs in hell, not angels."

"Everything in heaven comes from the same ether, same matter. Regardless of their purposes, they all tend to bear a resemblance."

"Purposes?" repeated Minho. "Your afterlife politics are way too weird to keep up with."

"Hey, I go off what I hear," Changbin sniped back. "Seraphs are the bruisers who keep the dead souls in line, cherubs are God's lapdogs, and angels are more of the peacemakers who keep humans away from it all. Naturally, I've never actually met one, but you spend a couple of years believing, and it sticks with you."

"Redemption?" asked Jisung.

"Catholicism."

"Ah."

"If all these are based off rumors," Hyunjin intervened, "how do we know if angels are even real?"

"You didn't think demons were real until you met me, didn't you?" Changbin challenged. None of them denied it. "If demons can break through the earth, then an angel can fall from the sky."

The gang looked over their sleeping stranger again, this time with a new layer of context.

"Hmm." Chan's thinking pose made a comeback. "I wonder if he counts as a customer."

"Chan, we love you, but nothing is ever going to beat Mothman."

Jisung rocked back on his heels, obviously wanting to go back to his garden, but still held back by his own questions. "So... what'll we do when he wakes up?"

"If he was able to stay out through all this, I'm sure we've got a while until that happens," Hyunjin replied. "Until then, we can set him up in a place that *isn't* public domain and go back to our normal lives until he wakes up."

It was a wise decision. An agreeable decision, one which they were all comfortable with making as a group. With four people in the room to take exactly one arm and leg, they were prepared to get it done and over with so they could help Changbin unpack and listen as Minho summarized the trip with some well-timed expletives.

Which would have been carried out smoothly had the angel not gasped awake.

The group flew apart with a scream, barely stifled by either their own hands or someone else's as his legs folded up, hands moved to push off the wood of the coffee table and rise slowly on the platform.

"Er... hi," the angel stammered, eyes flicking around like he was surrounded by a den of lions. "I mean, uh, I come in peace? No, no, they don't even know what you're doing here, *you* don't even know what you're doing here." The lot of his audience said nothing, which

might've added to his growing nervousness. "I'm- I'm sorry." He tread back, trying to spread the distance. "I just- I really don't know where I am, or- or what's going on, so... maybe it's best if I just-"

His words cut off in a shout as he pitched backwards off the coffee table, Changbin darting forward to catch him on cue. "*Whoa*, whoa, whoa, let's not have that." Even more panicked, the angel started to push away. "Hey- don't worry, it's okay, you're safe. I got you."

One twitch at a time, he stopped, took in the strength of his savior, looked up to meet his eyes. It was a first proper meet for both of them, but Changbin, despite his earlier confidence, seemed to have lost any substantial thought he could have ever had. Suddenly, the angel didn't look so afraid anymore. If one looked close enough, they might have seen the size of their worlds narrow down just to two.

"Are, uh." Changbin cleared his throat. Out of his line of sight, Minho's eyes flitted curiously between them. "Are you okay?"

The angel nodded, not taking his eyes off him. "I am now."

Hyunjin's eyebrows went straight up into his hairline. Jisung doubled over laughing, plunking his face into the siren's shoulder.

"Great! Great, that's- wait, wait, wait what? I- I didn't- uh-" Jisung wheezed hard, pointing at him. "Hey- stop laughing, I didn't tell you you could laugh."

"Dude, your face is so red right now," he snickered.

"Shut *up!*"

For better or for worse, it was that which broke the fourth wall for the angel, reminding him there were other beings in the room. He lifted himself out of Changbin's arms, carefully, like the carpet would revert to quicksand at a wrong step. "Where are we?"

"Eldritch, Oregon," answered Minho. "Town responsible for keeping Portland weird."

"Right. Okay, and... what's the decade?"

This, they hesitated to answer. "1992," said Chan, taking one for the team.

Any surprise at this answer only came through in the slightest lift of the brows. "Oh." He looked around, taking into account the record library, the tasteful kitsch peppering the shelves, and the plaid couch beside the coffee table he'd just risen from. "Oh."

His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he promptly pitched forward, this time caught by Chan, who did the job a little less elegantly than Changbin had- the result was something adjacent to a lumberjack hauling a fallen tree off the ground.

"Okay," Chan exhaled, voice slightly strained. "I know I'm probably going to be damned for all eternity for saying this in his presence, but what the *hell*?"

After fully adjusting to the fact that they had a confirmed angel under their roof, the gang decided that putting him up in a motel room would be the only decent thing to do- also so that the residing customers wouldn't pop into the main room and think that it was some backwoods Eldritch idea of an attraction.

"This guy has fallen unconscious *twice* since arriving here- he must have the immune system of a snowflake," Chan rambled, having gotten ahold of his head half. "Should I get the IV bag? Ventilator? Morphine?"

"Chan, he's in *shock*, not an asylum escapee," Hyunjin sniped back, holding up the legs. "Although he did ask what decade we were in, so that is an option to keep open."

“Bin, help me get this out of the ground!” called Jisung from the courtyard, having successfully crafted a stretcher out of woven roots.

But, evidently, given he hadn’t stopped pacing the floors for the last five minutes, Changbin was muddling through his own state of shock.

”... ‘I come in *peace*,’ I thought I said weird shit, but it wasn’t even *sarcastic*. And then the *voice*, and the accent, the *accent*, why- *why* did he have to have an accent, *fuck*.”

”Okay, you are useless,” Hyunjin told him.

”Minho, can you just void him?” asked Chan.

”I live to serve,” Minho responded blithely, spinning a lazy circle with his finger and opening a portal while sipping his vanilla bean latte in the same breath.

When Jisung had finally succeeded in uprooting his stretcher from the earth, the angel was dumped on it and slid into room 14 like a lotus drifting across a river. Resting on the bed, slumbering in an indisturbable state of eupnea, he could have been confused for a corpse passing peacefully into the next realm. If any of them had been any less lucky, the angel could have left them hanging for weeks.

But, thankfully for Jisung, he only had to wait a day.

He gasped back to life out of what felt like a year’s worth of sleep, opened his eyes to another new location.

Sunlight prying his eyes open, the brightness settled on a simple bedroom layout, soft cyan walls, gray shag carpet, a box set television set on top of a vanity pushed against the wall. In a tiny crystal vase by his bedside: fresh peace lilies* outlined by the shadow of a windowframe.

His hands twitched to life first, tensing and relaxing over the navy cotton bedspread, pushing up into a sit atop the mattress.

"Where..." he started, then panned down, finally catching sight of the blue haired spriggan on the ground with an overturned stool, gaping up at him. "Oh. Uh... sorry?"

"He lives," the guy whispered.

"Huh?"

"He *lives!*" His voice escalated into a roar that filled the whole room, rising with him as he shot to his feet. "And Hyunjin said most trauma victims wake up after two and a half days. Fiction over fact every time!"

That was zero to a hundred a little too quickly, mused Felix. Then again, if he'd started from a living room and ended up in a bed, time was a factor to be considered. "Hello, er. Again."

"Oh! Forgive me, I left my manners in the toolshed. I'm Jisung." He leapfrogged up on the bed beside him like they were old friends catching up. "Resident spriggan, gardening expert, self-trained veterinarian, and second singer-songwriter of the Levanter household."

Jisung held out a hand for Felix to shake. From this angle, it didn't look like there were any thorns poking out of his black sweater sleeve, so he accepted it. "That's a lot of titles."

"I'm good enough at a enough things for them to be professions. Don't really need anyone to officiate them when you know it for yourself, right?"

The easy confidence in his reply made the angel crack a smile. "Right," he said, looking around him. "Wait- did you say *spriggan*?"

"Yup. Locally sourced from Washington." At the dumbfounded look that had burst across Felix's face, Jisung laughed. "What? You thought you were among mortals here?"

"Well, *yeah*, I guess I just sort of *assumed*?"

The spriggan snorted. "That just proves you're an out-of-towner. In a place like Eldritch, you can never assume. Well, I guess that and your whole falling-from-the-sky deal. Speaking of which, is everything okay after that? Like, with initial trauma and all that jazz?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." *Guess I'm still not too good with first impressions.* "Sorry about that. I didn't scare you and your friends too much, did I?"

"You kidding? You were fine- around here, there's always something out of the ordinary happening." Jisung paused to ponder. "I guess you could say it kind of *is* the ordinary."

"Huh." That was... something of a relief. "Alright." Felix looked around; there didn't seem to be anything odd here, save for the afternoon chill in the air. "Oregon, right?"

"Yup. Best place for any weary traveler to find their way." Jisung's mouth tilted upwards with a shrug. "Wherever they come from."

Far cry from Louisiana. "Good to know." Weather was bound to be different for sure. It was something Felix could get used to. "And, as for the building which we're in, this is?"

"Levanter- sweetest little motel tucked up in Portland. Run by monsters, loved by all. *And* home to Stray Kids, the coolest coven in the Pacific Northwest," Jisung proclaimed proudly.

"I'm gonna go ahead and assume you've got something to do with that."

"Oh, you flatter me. But yes, that's what the gang and I are known as. Sometimes roommates just aren't enough." A new idea struck, and Jisung gasped and picked up his hand again. "You should come out and meet them! Everyone's been dying to know if you're okay."

"Really? I- I don't know."

"Come *on*. You seem decently conscious for once, and you passed Milo's vibe check *and* I'm pretty sure a round of second impressions would do you some good!" The spriggy's smile spread. "Plus if you can't walk too far, I could offer some help."

Maybe the days it had spent up in the clouds had messed with his head, but Felix was pretty sure it had been fifteen years since anyone had been this nice to him. *And I've learned enough in one life not to waste a good thing.* "I'll see how I do."

From that moment forward, Jisung used the approximate twenty-six steps it took for Felix to get from his bedroom to the door to summarize the entire history of Levanter from the vampire's arrival to the previous day's crash in less than a minute.

"- and that's how I accidentally sold cannabis butter to Jamie," Jisung concluded. "It goes pretty well in the garden section of their store, but, in the meantime, here we are!"

The courtyard was a fragment of summer dropped into the center of the motel, meadowblooms dotting the green grass, Japanese beetles dipping down to buzz by the couch. The air was filled with so many flowery scents Felix could convince himself he found magnolias when he breathed in, making the sting of familiarity hurt a little less.

"Minho, Chan!" He called out, waving over the vampire and djinn by the sliding glass doors. "Look who decided to join us!"

The pair looked up from their conversation; some compassion-starved soft spot inside of Felix was touched at how instantly

relieved they were to see him okay.

"We got off on the wrong foot the first time around- I was starting to get worried that you'd never wake up," said Chan.

"Not that we didn't make our wagers. I bet on you living," Minhó contributed. "I'm just glad we didn't have to bring out the body bag."

"Me too," Felix replied, choosing to dodge the casual staging of the word 'body bag' as something they had on hand. "Sorry if I messed anything up at your motel. Did my fall cause any property damage?"

"Oh, you're good on that," Chan promised. "Although you did leave a big starfish backplant in the floor of the pond. We were worried at first that it would scare the customers, but it's actually led to more income."

"Just as I said it would," Minhó reminded him. "Intrigue trumps fear every time."

Chan rolled his eyes, corner of his mouth tugging affectionately upward. "Marketing. Thankfully he understands it better than I do. Still, don't feel the need to apologize- we're just glad to see you awake."

"And on your own two feet, for a change." The new voice spun them around, and Hyunjin entered from the main room, nonchalantly throwing and catching the apple in his hand. "Perhaps the third time was the charm."

"And this here charmer is Hyunjin, the siren who pulled you out of the pond," Jisung introduced, dry as a desert. "Apparently he couldn't find a more fulfilling hobby than landscape painting at the time."

Felix cringed. "I must've ruined the mood."

"Not in the least. It was a watercolor, anyway. Regardless of what *Jisung* has to say about them," Hyunjin shot a subtly pointed glare at the spriggan through a side-eye, "they're as rewarding as they are therapeutic."

"I'm sure you've both got your rights." Felix had seen enough couples start out like this *La Merveille*- he'd give them their time. "But- doesn't this by itself technically count as illegal entering? I doubt people are allowed in here without a key."

"We like to do business a little differently here," Chan told him. "Anyone who looks like they need help can stay until they get all they need."

"You signed up for it when you passed out a total of three times on our grounds," Minho added. His smirk, instead of looking smug, seemed to be the set of something actually genuine. "Unless you got any spare change in those pockets, just take it easy."

Minho and Chan walked off, discussing what they were going to do now that they had a body to fit the pond silhouette- apparently a guest had called it *Angel's Landing*. "Why were they so nice to me?"

"It's just how we like to be." Jisung led him on, Hyunjin following in tow. "Even if people are just passing through, we like to help them get where they're going, catch them before they fall."

"We came to the conclusion that not enough people in the world have it, so we decided why not," replied Hyunjin. His apple returned to his palm, and he tracked some other landmark up ahead. "Speaking of falling, I think you've got one more person to thank."

The vibrant spark of laughter turned Felix's head forward before anything else did. Clouds unveiled the sun, a pair of white doves fluttered out the open window of room 27 and oh, *fuck*, there he was.

Glittering under a spotlight of fresh sunlight and possible delirium, the guy was leaning back on the backrest of the couch, casual as

casual could be. He was definitely talking back, grinning ear to ear at something he'd overheard Chan say to Minho, but Felix couldn't comprehend the specifics over the blaring chorus of Dream Weaver* that had hijacked his mind. Any bad boy image he could have been going for with his ruffled black hair and mythically muscular arms was ruined sorely by the infectiously charming grin taking over his sweet, round-cheeked face. He looked like he'd run Felix's heart through with a 1950's red Corvette with the top down, classic rock blasting, rendering him useless for the rest of eternity.

"Now, I don't know how hazy your memory is," started Jisung, looking like he could hear the soundtrack out of Felix's ears, "but that's Changbin. He's the guy who saved you a concussion on your first fall."

Felix's ears flamed at the reminder. Because of course *that* was how they first met. "I remember."

"He might look all intimidating on the surface," said Hyunjin, "but really he's a softie."

"Likes long walks down main street," added Jisung.

"Soft spot for the blues."

"Major sweet tooth."

"Can probably bench the weight of the whole kitchen, but he's humble."

"Might just be part of his whole dumbass greaser 'stay-gold-Ponyboy' shtick, but he's always been that kind of guy," Jisung went on.

"Speaking as someone who's known him for ten years, they just don't make 'em like that anymore."

One of God's many shortcomings, it seemed. Now, however, He was flaunting it in front of his face, flying an aerial advertising banner reading *You're Screwed, Felix*, in all caps. "I could infer."

“Come to think of it,” Hyunjin mused. “He was pretty worried after you passed out.”

The worry in Changbin's big brown eyes flashed back to him like second nature. “Really?”

“Yeah.” The siren balanced an elbow on Felix's shoulder. “I bet if you talked to him, it'd really ease his mind.”

“If you're up for it,” said Jisung nonchalantly. “You could go back to your room and rest, if you're feeling too drowsy, or...”

Changbin had seated himself on the backrest of the couch, watching a ladybug flit idly by. “I could do that.”

“*You will?*” The lights in their faces had dialed up to a thousand in a matter of seconds. Then, as if self aware, they blanched off like nothing had happened.

“I mean, sure, if that's what you want.”

“Yeah, cool, whatever.”

Felix was never going to understand the denizens of Earth in any decade. “And... if it's alright with you, it's something I'd like to do alone?”

“*Right*, right, right.” The two of them zipped off into the shadow of the nearest pillar, watching as Felix tread carefully forward on his own. It was possible that they high-fived before disappearing from his periphery.

Okay, he remediated, fixing his gaze on the target ahead. *You can do this*. He could do this- he *had* done this, once, somehow. Maybe it had been chance or fate or dumb luck, but the guy he'd tested it out on ended up falling in love with him for an entire year, so he could guess that it had gone well. *Just go in blind, talk to him like his*

roommates didn't just reveal every adorable detail on who he is- chances are, it won't be as much of a mess as you're thinking.

Except the last time he'd talked to a guy with any intent was about sixteen years ago, and this was a guy who'd literally swept him off his feet within five seconds of meeting him. And Felix, still being half out of his mind, promptly hit on him and passed out again.

Yup. This was going to be great.

Felix stopped seven, six, five feet away- there, that was a healthy distance, not measured at all. Just close enough to see every ruinous detail of his profile, just far enough to pretend he couldn't.

He cleared his throat, which most definitely was his first mistake, given the minute he did Changbin swiveled his head around to look right up at him, all wide brown eyes and soft mouth parting in a little 'o' of surprise, erasing every rational word from his mind. "I- uh. Hey-"

"Oh, it's-"

"Sorry, I didn't- I wasn't trying-"

"No, you're- I mean-"

"I-I just, I'm, here. Now. Uh." He fumbled through gestures, settled briefly in jazz hands. "Yeah."

"Yeah." Changbin looked just as sheepish as he felt. Perhaps neither of them had been aware that one simple introduction could fuck up so badly. "Uh, morning."

In a desperate attempt to save their first official interaction, Felix's brain scrambled for 'hi' at the same time his mouth went for 'morning.' What ended up coming out was: "Horny."

Changbin's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. "Oh?"

“*Shit*- sorry, I-”

“I mean, sure, sometimes-”

“I- *ha*- I mean, it’s not that- I-I don’t. *Ugh*, man.” The eyebrows were still raised, but the tiniest smile was poking out of any possible skepticism Changbin could have had, so maybe this wasn’t the worst thing in the world. “Sorry. I literally just woke up from two whole days of sleep, so- can we start over?”

“Really? I kinda liked the direction this was heading in.”

“*You* did.” Changbin’s budding smile sparked a chuckle, which naturally was an absolute revelation of a sound. “Morning.”

“Welcome back to the world,” he replied smoothly. So far, he didn’t seem too upset by the fact that Felix had decided to make the reentry. “Everything been treating you alright so far?”

“So far, yeah. I mean, you guys were nice enough to set me up in a room, so that was a plus. And I got a tour guide right off the bat.” Felix spared a wave behind him to Jisung, who yanked Hyunjin behind the pillar with him. “Jisung’s been cool.”

“Hm,” Changbin hummed, line of his mouth tightened like he might have something else to say on the matter. Just as quickly, however, the tension was gone. “You don’t seem to be doing too rough for someone who supposedly fell out of the sky and into the backyard.”

Love the irony in that. “Well, the service has been nice,” Felix replied lightly. “No one’s got any grudge against me for freefalling onto their property- think mostly because it might’ve actually *helped* - and I got to wake up in a bedroom rather than the padded cubicle I was expecting. But, the welcoming committee?” He slipped a knowing smirk across to Changbin, who dropped his head with the abashed smile that split over his face. “I don’t know who I’d be if I didn’t commend that.”

His flustered laugh came from a deep rumble in his chest, faint, like he wanted to keep it to himself. "It was nothing," Changbin said dismissively, hand rubbing the back of his neck. "Just didn't want you to crack your head open, that's all."

"Well, that much I could tell. The reaction time was flawless, and the *delivery*, I mean. One could say it swept me off my feet." He rolled his eyes up to the clouds, biting down a smile that was too persistent to leave his face. "You really don't do that often?"

"I mean, it isn't every day that we bring our unwanted guests to the living room so they can wake up from the forest to the coffee table."

Felix raised a brow, intrigued. "Oh?"

"Not -! Not that you're unwanted. Or that it isn't nice that you're here. Or, that, y'know, I wouldn't have caught you under other circumstances, but-" When he nodded him on, Changbin scoffed, releasing a breathy laugh. "It just felt like the thing to do."

As much as Felix hated to invoke the name of his creator, good *Lord*, this guy was cute. "Then it certainly made a good judge for your character."

"You can count on it. Anytime."

Felix was going to make damn sure he held him to that. If he had any say in the matter, it was the least he could be certain he'd do. "I know we didn't exactly chat long enough to get to first name basis, so. I'm Felix."

He could see him matching the name to the face, all the way from the living room to now. "Felix," Changbin repeated. "I'm Changbin."

"I know." And *fuck* the clean streak. "That. That sounded terrible. Um. Damn, just when this stopped being weird. I didn't know that. I mean, I do, but. Only because Hyunjin and Jisung told me."

“Oh.” Changbin peeked over his shoulder again, where the pair in question wasn’t hiding, but out and waving. The expression from before returned, and this time Felix recognized what it was: carefully concealed irritation beneath a smile. “Assholes.”

Who knows, he mused. *Maybe I’ll get to see what it’s all about.* It sounded like something to look forward to. “In their defense,” Felix started, reverting Changbin’s attention back to him. “I did want to know.”

“Oi! Binnie!” Chan yelled from the courtyard’s center, way louder than the required volume. “Quit hogging the new guy! It’s time for introductions!”

Maybe Changbin didn’t deflate as much as Felix imagined as he pushed off the couch backrest. He probably wasn’t reimagining what Hyunjin meant by ‘long walks down main’ in first-date form. He might’ve been looking for an out before Chan had even said anything.

But the smile he gave him, a delicate half moon, slipped into his hand like a stolen sweet from the counter, was something Felix knew he was meant to keep for himself. “I’m glad you’re okay,” Changbin said, and ambled off to join the rest of his coven.

Felix watched them greet him teasingly, watched him hide his smile behind their backs again. *Me too.*

Next thing he knew, he was stationed in front of them, all four members of the coven filed in a row.

“Now that we’ve deemed you as fully conscious and of sound mind, it’s time you get a proper introduction to Levanter,” Chan opened up.

They shifted formation to single-file, Minho up first. “Minho, retired djinn, health and safety manager of Levanter. If you hear anything that sounds suspiciously like a corpse being electromagnetically reawakened from the dead, my cats like to hunt in the night.”

"*That's* what that was!" exclaimed Felix. "I thought my subconscious was bringing back PTSD from 1934's *Frankenstein*."

"Familiars tend to have that effect. Have any problems, call- just preferably any time before nine pm."

Folding into a gentlemanly bow, the djinn sidestepped curtly out of the way for Jisung, who was waiting with a smile.

"Groundskeeper and petwatcher, specialize in the all-too-special. Ever need to know the difference between a beet and a rutabaga? I'm your guy."

"Got it. And if that's the case, pro tip- invest in okra if you haven't already. Stewing it with tomatoes is the *shit*."

Jisung grinned. "Man, I knew I was gonna like you."

Popping off a few finger guns, he spun out the way of Hyunjin, who readily took his hand in greeting. "Tourism relations expert, currently bringing Romanticism back to the 90's, best music taste in the house. Jisung'll tell you otherwise, but he just wishes he was right about something."

"I do remember hearing a snippet Waterloo before I hit the pond. Was that you demonstrating?"

"Guilty as charged," Hyunjin replied. "Which leads to a good opening- what exactly happened that got you falling?"

"Uh." Definitely too cheerful of a mood to answer that question now. "Let's just leave it as a matter of miscommunication for now."

He twirled Felix around in a giddy circle as he slipped away; when the angel regained stability, Changbin was standing in the space before him.

"Head of security and motel resources, Changbin," the demon supplied. "Y'know, in case you hadn't already forgotten."

Felix beamed at him. "I hadn't."

He might've gotten to rest his eyes on the grateful smile that bloomed over Changbin's face a little longer if Chan didn't shove him so eagerly out of the way.

"Facility and guest manager, Bang Chan," said the vampire, heartily shaking the hand Hyunjin had dropped. "It's great to meet you conscious!"

"Figured I couldn't go too long without paying for my room," Felix responded. With someone so animated as Chan, it felt almost natural to take in the energy for himself. "Oh! Here's an idea- tell people if they make a wish at the pond and God answers, then Like a Prayer* will play out of room 14."

His finger snapped into a point of approval. "If this is the way you think all the time, you stay here as long as you want."

After that was done and over with, it was revealed to Felix after Hyunjin and Minho sat him on the couch that really, he *could*.

"You're not the first person who's come to Levanter without knowing where they're gonna go next," explained Jisung. "Call it coincidence, but it's the kind of crowd we draw."

"We call it the two-week deal," said Minho. "They get to live charge-free in their room for fourteen days while we, as a staff and a local coven, help them figure out what their next steps will be."

"Once they figure that out, they're given the option to either pick up their stuff and get going, or stick around here," said Hyunjin.

"But all that's up to you," Changbin lined out.

The offer was there on the table, gift-wrapped and waiting for him to open. Two whole weeks- the wanderer's special. A whopping fourteen days in a magical motel with four eccentrically different guys

and all the time in the world to figure his shit out. Maybe his first Earth experience hadn't exactly gone how he wanted. Maybe this was a chance for more, for better. *Maybe this is the do over I've been wishing for all these years.*

"Okay," decided Felix. "I'm in."

And Chan, with his magnificently curly hair and weirdly non threatening fanged smile, handed him his key. "Then, Felix," he declared. "We hope you enjoy your stay."

So, with permission and an official claim to a room, that was what Felix devoted his time at Levanter to doing.

The first thing he did was change up his wardrobe- Minho had generously offered his assistance instead of waiting for Felix to ask him for help.

"If you're going to assimilate to the 90's, you're going to have to ditch this whole." Minho gestured with disinterest at Felix's entire body from head to toe. "Thing you got going on here. You have far too much spirit about you for a monochrome palette."

"Vibe reads," Hyunjin whispered in the angel's ear. "He's great at those."

His all white dress shirt-and-slacks uniform thrown into a starstruck dumpster fire, Felix's closet was quickly filled with a plethora of neon button-ups, sweater vests, purposely baggy jeans, and other bizarre patterns that somehow made their way from out of geometry textbooks to clothing stores. ("We'll get to the band shirts later," Hyunjin promised. "Music is a whole other topic to cover.")

When they were able to construct a few outfits that, according to Minho, *wouldn't* send the next generation running for the hills, Hyunjin and Jisung took them out to main street to try them out on an audience.

"And, here we have one of the most popular stops of all," Hyunjin announced, "our favorite bakery, Paint The Town."

"The birthplace of my longtime addiction to boysenberry cheesecake," informed Jisung.

Seeing the little place decked out with every sweet imaginable-breadbaskets on bookshelves, boroys and puff pastries sharing aisle spaces, pastel cupcakes and fresh muffins making a tower that nearly touched the ceiling -Felix was done for in seconds. "And you guys make all these *yourselves*?"

"With some assistance from the local will-o-wisps, yeah," Jiwoo replied, giggling as Jisung jumped back from his little-too-close range to the tres leche making up one of the centerpieces like he'd been burned by the air. "It's all done with love, though."

"Every couple of weeks we try to come up with something new," said Chaewon, whisking a bowl of batter behind her. "There's so much you can do with sweet things- why not try it?"

While someone who Hyunjin had briefly introduced as Hyejoo yelled at her to get back to the mango mousse, the town wasn't ready yet for a no-bake peanut butter-chocolate tart, Felix zoned out, honing on on the last word he'd heard. "Something new," he murmured. *Sounds good to me.*

Hyunjin watched him, took a bite of the maamoul he'd snuck from one of the cookie jars and perched an elbow on Jisung's shoulder. "I sense some inspiration taking hold," he mused.

The inspiration only rooted deeper when they returned back to Levanter, Felix making a beeline for Changbin, demanding he show them their entire pantry supply.

"We like to go off the Mayan calendar here in terms of storage and what we keep- never know what we might need or when." Changbin stopped in the middle of the bunker, peeking up with a smile at the

budding elation on Felix's face. "So, really, you could make pretty much anything you want with what's here."

The angel managed to channel his enthusiasm into a nod. "I can work with that."

Through two full days of research and more than a few trips to Paint The Town, Felix constructed his first brownie recipe right in the main room kitchen of Levanter. The first taste-test was performed by Jisung, the chosen delegate of the coven, who watched with bated breath as he took a bite. Instantly, he collapsed on the stool, giving a thumbs up that erupted the room in cheers.

Most of the first week at Levanter, Felix just spent having fun with who was there. Even if it was just laughing at client stories with Chan, forest-foraging with Jisung, or squeezing himself in between Hyunjin and Minho to watch *Murder on the Orient Express* with three bowls of popcorn making the rounds on Friday movie night, it felt like coming back. A welcome to a world that hadn't forgotten about him after all.

Somewhere underneath the feeling, in the sour pit of his stomach that wouldn't let him forget the life before, was a small biting bitterness, anger at himself for enjoying it so much. He shouldn't- not when he'd known so many others who'd gone under without a chance of coming back up. What gave him the right to do any different?

Stop it, he'd snap at himself. He'd been given a second chance- the people he'd known hadn't been so lucky. All he could wish for them was peace, wherever they had gone. *Maybe I could find it too.*

On the fourth day, upon experiencing the rare and thoroughly underrated luxury that was waking up late, he found that the normally bustling noise of the courtyard was empty, seemingly transported through the open main room door, which let out the raucous cheers and yells coming from beyond. On slipping through, there was a PTT pink box sitting undone on the kitchen table; the

only thing inside was a sticky cinnamon pecan roll that had been purposely left untouched.

Roommates, Felix thought with the sweet prick of warmth that spread through his chest. Another thing he could get used to.

Stepping outside, he found Minho leaning his shoulder against the bleachers, robe wrapped around himself, looking out over the field with a mug of green tea. He glanced around to meet Felix's eyes with a smile, like he'd planned his arrival just right. "About time you gave it a rest with the early rising. I was starting to wonder if I should start questioning your sanity."

"Considering you haven't already, I'll take it as a compliment." Felix ripped a bite off his roll, gestured with it up ahead. "What's going on out there?"

"Oh, just a little thing we do on Thursdays to get the blood flowing. Figuratively, at least."

"Quit playing around, Chan!" Hyunjin yelled to their right. "He's top heavy- sweep the leg!"

"Stick close to the light, Binnie!" yelled Jisung on their left. "You got this!"

Felix looked to Minho for an explanation. The djinn simply tipped his mug in the direction of the field, where the real show was taking place.

Out on the worn grass, still in their sleepclothes, Chan and Changbin were circling each other- not in a dance, but a fight. Lunging in calculated steps, dodging and catching the other's move, and, from the look of it, having a hell of a time. No matter how hard the punch or how close the flying kick came to their nose, the smiles never left their faces.

On the sidelines, Hyunjin and Jisung were cheering it on like they were watching pitted duelists in the colosseum. Minho couldn't have possibly been less concerned. "*This* is what you guys do on Thursdays?"

Minho lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "Like I said, we hate to get rusty. A lot of stuff happens in this place- just last week before you got here, a badalisc tried to break into the pantry and steal all our protein bars. But other times it's just for fun. That, or settling a score over who's gonna fix the main room kitchen again."

Whatever the reason, it didn't seem to bother the brawlers too much. Through several traded hooks and jabs that looked too practiced not to have been broken out in a real scrap, Changbin threw a cross that Chan turned his head at the last minute to avoid, changing his footing to press the advantage and press back, bringing them closer to the shade made by the trees.

"Come on!" Jisung complained as Hyunjin whooped. "Make him work for it! Don't just let him get the drop on you!"

"I'm trying!" Changbin shouted back, narrowly missing another jab. As he continued shifting backwards, putting up the defensive, he countered a feint that Chan used to slip under his arm and into the dark. Hyunjin's cheers lasted only half a second before the demon twisted around, arm a sudden blazing streak of black fire that reached *into* the shadow, grabbed a pale arm, and flung Chan back out onto the field.

"*Damn* it!" Hyunjin cursed.

"Yes!" Jisung crowed, shooting up on his feet as Chan rolled like a tumbleweed back into the land of the light, skidding back with his toes digging in the ground and a hand in the dirt.

Below the stands, Felix was still trying to wrap his head around what exactly it was he'd seen. "Wha- how- *how* did he do that?"

"You've seen Chan shadow-travel before," Minho replied blithely, swirling his tea. "Binnie just used his own power to counteract on it. Bit of a wild card, but we can count on him for it."

"No- I mean, the- the- *shadow* thing he just did. On his arm, what was that stuff?"

"You mean the ether?" Tentatively, Felix nodded. The reaction was enough to take Minho's full attention off the fight. "Surely as an angel, I thought you'd know."

If there was one thing Felix didn't miss about people not knowing his inhumane identity, it was the assumptions that went with it. "Well, I... I guess I don't."

Minho's brows furrowed with piqued curiosity. "You at least know about the elements? The roots, the history, the ways they're harnessed?"

How I wish I could pretend I understood at least half the words you just said. "Um. No?"

"Huh." The shoulder lean was now directed at him. "Guess you didn't get a lot of exposure up in the heavenly thereafter."

Felix still hadn't said too much about it, but he supposed that much could be inferred. "We, uh, weren't exactly His top priority."

"And by 'His,' you mean..." Felix nodded up at the sky. "Ah. Cursed be his name."

The angel laughed hollowly. "If only."

Minho's mouth poked up in a wry half smile. "Seems like kind of a rip-off deal. I mean, aren't you guys supposed to be the guardians of humans and nature, messengers to mankind, et cetera?"

Funny we even have such a loaded title. They didn't even get to do half of it. "Well, there is the ability of flight. Your myths weren't wrong

about that." A jerk at his heartstrings zipped through his body. "But."

"But what?" Quizzical brow raise became concerned. "Were you cursed? Marred? Demoted?"

"No, just." The sting of the misericorde sliced through the nape of his neck. Felix bit his lip. "Not really able to do it anymore."

It wasn't like he hadn't tried. Deep under the cover of the forest trees, at night when the others were asleep, he'd try to feel some kind of connection to the sky above. Running leaps, meditation, even one reckless attempt at jumping from the halfway point of a pine tree. All of it was useless; he'd known it since the first minute he woke up that something was missing, and it wasn't anything that magic could fix. That it was the garrison's final goodbye. That even if he wanted to, he would never be able to go back up there.

But if there was anything these guys understood well, it was boundaries. "That's a shame," Minho hummed, pensively sipping his tea. "Although, if I remember correctly, there are other types of angels that use light magic, right?"

"I'm... pretty sure, yeah. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was just thinking. Seraphs harness it through cardiac control- they activate the energy from their heart through their bones. It's how they get their strength and flight. If all of you came from the same maker, then the source of that power can't be too different."

"As good as that sounds, you might get a different answer with me." But Felix couldn't deny that it did *sound* logical. "How do even know that, anyway?"

"Oh, I'm not the expert. Ask Changbin- he's got the most experience."

He followed the djinn's gaze back out to the field, where Changbin was aiming lightning-fast punches from every direction, expression

fixed in concentration. "But I thought he was a demon."

"Not always." Minho's smile had dimmed, gone back through time. "A good thirty-six years ago, he was human. Died in an accident and fell off the wrong side of the tracks. While he was in hell, he fought off seraphs by the dozen- they were the guard dogs that kept everyone inside."

"Shit." It certainly explained the reflexes. Felix had suspected some kind of dark backstory, but still; hearing it was something he hadn't been prepared for. "But he's here now."

"And by no miracle, either. After he had enough of where he was, he planned his escape. Fought his way out, and, flash all the way to 1982, he popped up through the ground in Jisung's garden, back to the land of the living."

"Time!" Jisung called out.

Felix's gaze drifted to the demon again. Changbin was helping Chan off the dirt, face split in a wide, gregarious smile, made brighter with laughter that resonated all the way to the bleachers. He couldn't help but think it was funny- how all those decades of fighting only conspired to make him kind. And yet Felix saw it in his spirit, the way he moved, like he was meant to be beheld from a stage lit up by spotlights and gilded by ring ropes instead of a backyard.

"Incredible."

"If anyone could be," Minho replied, voice glimmering with pride. His eyes reassessed Felix's face, relaxed his features into a smirk.

"You've taken quite a liking to him."

"Huh?" Suddenly he was hyperaware of the topic of discussion, the look on Minho's face that said everything words didn't have to. "Oh! Well- I mean, it's nothing, really, I- I don't even know if I'm gonna stay yet."

Minho shrugged. "I'd give it some thought." He gave him a playful nudge with his elbow. "It may feel like nothing now, but down the line, it's worth it."

Chan accepted the red-filled Nalgene Hyunjin tossed to him, running a hand through his dark curls; Minho watched him with the content leisure of knowing he wouldn't have to look away. On the side of his neck, where his kimono had slipped down, two puncture holes marked the skin. "I'm guessing that didn't come from sparring."

The djinn's eyes snapped back to him, followed his gaze with bemusement. "You guessed right," he chuckled. "This isn't your first time on earth- I'm assuming you had to have met *someone* before now."

Someone. He'd been more than just someone. *He was the reason I stayed and left.* "I did," Felix confessed. His mouth tasted like pecans and icing sugar. "Have someone, but. He's gone now."

Minho was probably realizing by now that he'd lost a lot of things. But, if the smile he replied with was any answer, perhaps that was something they had in common. "Then I guess we're gonna make damn sure you make the most of now."

Suddenly, he grabbed Felix's wrist and dragged him out from behind the bleachers. "Hey, Chan! If you're not already spent, I've got another student for you."

"What are you *doing*?" Felix hissed. "Before I've even finished my cinnamon roll?"

But Chan was already rising to his feet. "All I was waiting for was the moment you asked," he responded, fangs poking through in a red-tinted smile. "What about it, Felix? You wanna take the field?"

Hyunjin and Jisung were edging up to the railings like they were about to witness another fight. Changbin's brows raised in challenge, smirked to ask, *Well, are you?*

"You wanna get your groove back?" Minho whispered. "You got to put your dukes up first."

So Felix swallowed the last of his cinnamon roll and told him, "Yes."

For the next three days, Felix's hopes of easing into late rising were dashed by an all-too chipper vampire busting down his door at six-thirty in the morning telling him to rise and shine before the sun got any ideas. As tempted as he was to point out that the Portland sun didn't show its face until about four additional hours, he wanted to hold on to his room key a little longer.

"There he goes," Jisung murmured, handing him a protein shake as he passed the kitchen on his way to the backyard. "Another young soldier off to war."

"We all had to do it sometime," lamented Hyunjin. "*Someone* just decided to sign him up early."

"Any particular reason for that, Minho?" Changbin asked the djinn, who calmly sipped his morning tea.

"He could spend all his two weeks here wallowing over what he doesn't have," Minho replied. "Let's see what he does with what we give him."

What Felix could appreciate about his training was that it didn't start with immediate fist-to-face contact; there was, as Chan would explain to him, a technique that went with all fighting. Ways to stay light on your feet even when the ground was shaking below you, to see where your opponent was aiming before they fired off their next attack, to find the kind that worked for him.

"No one's saying you have to be the next Rocky," Chan summarized. "You've just got to find what keeps you in the ring."

After a few rounds of clumsy trial and error, Jisung matched him with the fighter profile of 'Speedy Gonzalez,' which coincidentally was the

same one he'd given Hyunjin. The siren dropped in on the next few lessons, giving him some pointers on how to use flash as a defense and find the weak points in the opponent's stability, topping it off with the full hand-me-down collection of Bruce Lee's greatest hits. Upon emerging with an extensive knowledge of taekwondo and crush on Brandon Lee,* they set the date for Tuesday for his first unrestricted parring match.

He met Chan on the field under an early gray sky, their match observed by a coven of an audience all crammed into one set of bleachers.

"Go, Felix!" Hyunjin cheered. "Brandon believes in you!"

"Less than a week, and he's already learned all this?" marveled Changbin.

"Guess the heavenly father blessed him with speedy braincells," said Jisung. "The guy's a natural."

"Eyes up, clear focus!" Minho encouraged. "Just keep your head in the fight!"

With the support of the boys as background noise, Felix immersed himself in the moment. From what he'd been taught by 70's martial arts movies, the legs were for advancement and attacking and arms for blocking, which meant with every punch Chan threw, he returned it with something the experts might have called an air back kick and an elbow block for when he landed on his feet, followed up by a flurry of other moves that he just thought looked cool in Enter The Dragon. Sure, it could have been less sloppy, but going by the applause booming from the benches and the fact that he was lasting longer than the feared minute, Felix could afford to worry about it later.

"You got it, Felix!" Jisung shouted. "Nail him with a fast one!"

And perhaps the spriggan's words were a prophecy, because when he dodged a cross aimed for his jaw, the next move Felix made was a back hook that brought his heel straight across Chan's face.

The cheers skidded to a halt. "*Oh hhh...*"

"Shit," Jisung breathed, earning suspicious looks from his fellow coven members. "Wha- hey, I was *joking*."

Chan staggered backwards, hand grazing over his face. Felix stilled his feet on the ground, suddenly too afraid to move. "I-I'm so sorry," he stammered. "I- I didn't- I mean to-"

"Are you *kidding*?" Chan's hand fell away, revealing a ridiculously broad smile under a spurting bloody nose. "I've never been so happy to get kicked in the face- do it again!"

At first, Felix wasn't sure he'd heard him right. Then the applause started up again, louder and more boisterous than before. Jisung and Hyunjin had their hands cupped around their mouths like megaphones. Changbin was giving him a full standing ovation, roaring his name. Even Minho was slow clapping him on, though he'd just clocked his boyfriend in the nose.

It might've been the two decade timeskip, but Felix was really having trouble dealing with the fact that not everyone in the world was an asshole.

Day four of hand-to-hand combat, Felix took his training to the rotating kickstand Chan had set up for him in the sparring field. He'd just pulled off a roundhouse that sent the top paddle spinning in circles when a now-familiar laugh rumbled behind him.

"Nice shot," said Changbin, sauntering up behind him. "You could've taken anyone's head off with that one."

Felix smiled back at him; it had become a force of habit. "Thanks. But I'm trying more for subtlety- try to bring out something people

won't see coming."

"Eh, I wouldn't waste the time. If that's what you have to resort to, they know where they stand with you." Changbin glanced over the stained sweats that Hyunjin had lent to him. "You been at this for long?"

"Not really. Just thought I'd warm up before Chan got here. Wait- I don't have to fight *you*, do I?"

"Oh, hell no. I don't think either of us are ready for that." He tossed him the water bottle that he'd left on the grass. "Actually, I've taken on a shift as your new teacher."

Felix choked halfway through a sip. "You what?"

"Minho's orders. Guess he thought I'd be a good candidate to give you a crash course on the use of magic during fighting. Don't ask me why- I don't have a clue."

He snuck a peek at the window to room 15, where Minho was waiting with a tea mug and a genial wave. "He does work in mysterious ways."

Changbin chuckled in agreement, shifted back on the grass. "Well, I was thinking we could try it out, see how it goes. Maybe it isn't too bad of an idea, y'know?"

Arguably, it wasn't. Sure, Felix would definitely focus a little less on the lesson and more on the instructor, but he could pick up the basics to cover up. Plus, if his skills on the sparring field had anything to show for it, Changbin would have quite the curriculum in store. *And how could I turn down such a generous offer?* "We could give it a try," Felix amended. "But maybe in a different setting?"

Despite his confusion at the request, Changbin followed him beyond the viewline of the motel under a cover of fir trees that blocked out even the clouds.

"Are you sure you want to start here?" asked the demon. "Usually you want to be surrounded by as much of your element as possible."

"I know," Felix replied airily. "We're not completely stranded- look, there's some light around here!" He waved a hand at the patches of sunlight dotting the grove. "Thought it'd be better to start small. Don't want to have too much light, right?"

"Uh-huh." Changbin looked over his shoulder, probably measuring the distance from Levanter by memory. "We're not... hiding from anyone, are we?"

"No! No, of course not. Just thought, y'know, if I mess up, the others won't see it. The most damage I can do here is zap a tree- I will be doing zapping, right? Minhoo wasn't the most specific on what form my power would take."

But Changbin wasn't quite ready to drop the subject. "Given how fast of a learner you've been so far, I don't see how that would change now."

Man. Felix could see where his sparring stubbornness came from. "Yeah, well." If he looked up, he could almost trick himself into seeing a wisp of cloud in the blue. "This is different."

Changbin's back touched the base of a tree, brow lifted in curiosity. "How so?"

Felix held his tongue by instinct- foolish instinct. *What's the risk? It's not like you're here because they care.* If anyone did, they'd have annihilated him when they had the chance.

Still, Felix kept his head down when he replied, "Angels aren't exactly... *allowed* to use magic."

Changbin scoffed. "That sounds like a shit rule."

A beat passed. No silver lightning. No ten plagues repeat. *Guess that's good.* "More just how we lived. Just stayed up in the skies, made sure no humans started shit or questioned anything in terms of up or down there, and let our counterparts do the dirty work for us."

"Didn't any of you guys ever question that?"

Felix chuckled dryly. "Kinda how I ended up here."

Something softened and resolved on his face. "Bet that took a lot of nerve."

Felix had tried and failed to convince himself of the same thing- it sure didn't sound the same coming from someone else. "Long time coming, really," he admitted, settling down on the grass. "Been feeling it for years before I got... fed up, let it all out." Fourteen years of pent up rage, out in seconds. "Naturally, the garrison didn't take my constructive criticism too well."

"Well, it must've been something if it got you booted from the whole operation."

He said it so easily- the words that everyone else had been avoiding all week -that Felix had to laugh. "That's one way to put it."

"That's how it should be put. Even if you got shut out, you said what the rulemakers were too afraid to hear and stuck with it." The demon shook his head, laughing softly to himself. "Some hell of a deal."

"Deal? What're you talking about, a 'deal?'"

"Your how-I-ended-up-here, your reason. The coven's been trying to figure out yours since you got here!"

"I believe I have a right to my own *privacy*."

"Which you've been using an excuse to hold out on us." Changbin plunked down cross-legged across from him. "So why all this? You didn't make Chan take you out here when you were fighting."

"You know the old eye in the sky, don't you?" He motioned for him to go on: *obviously*. "If I'm out in open daylight, learning to tap into power that I've been forbidden from since the beginning of time, exiled or not, I'd still get a pretty big target on my back."

Changbin nodded, like he'd answered a question beyond the one he'd asked. "Well, you're braver than I was when I got here."

Coming from a guy who literally broke out of hell. "I find that hard to believe."

A smile opened up on Changbin's face, wry under the shade of the fir tree. "I didn't leave the top floor for almost my two whole weeks." Felix's jaw slacked gently open. "Go on, laugh. It's true." When Felix didn't say a word, he dropped his gaze to the grass, watching the breeze move the blades. "I didn't get a key to room 21- I chose it. I thought if I touched solid ground for a second, even just to remember how grass felt again, the demons down below would feel it. The seraphs would know, and I'd." He paused, swallowing the memory that flashed behind his eyes. "They'd pull me under. Take me back. I didn't want to risk it."

The demon shook it off, blinked himself back into the present. "Chan and Jisung were nice enough to provide room service. Minho got me over my shit and brought me to the courtyard. He'd wanted me to meet the baby deer Jisung had brought into his hospice." His eyes connected to Felix's over the distance. "What I'm saying is, I know what being a runaway's like because that's what I was too."

And here Felix thought he'd been looking at a guy who'd never been scared by anything in his life. *He thought the ground would rise up, while I can't stop imagining the sky crashing down.* Opposite ends of crazy, and yet they both came from the same fear. "And here we both are, in the coziest motel in the Pacific Northwest."

The smile that cracked across his face felt like a reward. "Man, I *knew* Jisung fed you that line."

"Doesn't he give it to everyone? I just thought it was part of orientation." Bits of laughter puffed out, bringing even more light to the grove. "This world can change a lot in twenty years. It's not so unreasonable that you were afraid of it."

Changbin shrugged. "Took a while to accept, 's all. Only mistake I made was thinking it would all be the same as it was when I left."

"At least you stayed awake for it. All I heard was '1992' before I was out again."

Changbin laughed at the reminder- there was no one around to make fun of it now. "Guess we go to show neither heaven or hell is the place to be."

In heaven, Felix had always heard whispers about the horrors of hell- screams coming from every denizen, a new terror on each level. *He doesn't have a place on any of them.* "Some beings just aren't meant to be held back."

He delivered the words right into Changbin's eyes; he knew the minute they hit their mark. "And neither are you." Suddenly the space felt so much smaller, sharing it with someone who understood how he felt. "So. Where do we want to start?"

Felix edged forward. "Let's start at the beginning."

The beginning started with the thing Minho had mentioned earlier: ether. The baseline of every monster's power, it came from inside of them, brought out by the element they'd been born from.

"There was an old myth that it came from a gland hidden inside the heart, but that was debunked," Changbin explained, pacing round the grove. "Truth is, it's nothing physical- it's just in you. Where it comes out doesn't matter- that's got more to do with the user than the magic. The source is always the same, materialized with the blood in your body."

"Uh-huh," Felix murmured, jotting it down on the notepad he'd brought with him. "And the connection with the elements- how does that work?"

"Well, you know how Hyunjin's water magic comes from the pond in the clearing, and Chan's through whatever shadow is closest?" Nod. "It's like that. Whatever element you're linked to, whatever source is closest, that's where you'll get it. Fire comes from heat sources, earth from plants and dirt, psychic with potential energy, and, with celestial types like Minho, the sun and moon."

"So any given time, I'm dying either way?"

"Correct."

Tucking away his notepad, Felix rose to his feet, turned his own palms up to his face. "And what about me?"

Changbin stopped his pacing, paused to take him in. "If you ask me," he started, "you're the saving grace. Your element's found in all kinds of places- over the earth, given off by fire, reflected on water. Even in the dark it's there- it has to be, or there's nothing to hope for."

He cupped his hands under Felix's, lifted up his palms. "You're the reason lost travelers found their way out of the darkest caverns. You're what people switch on when they're too scared to be alone. You're what glows at both the beginning of the tunnel and the end. As long as there is life, there is light." The demon's eyes were a dark sky site, filled with burning meteors. "And as long as you have that, there's nothing you can't do."

Felix could feel the words washing over him like a spell, prickling needles under his skin, lighting up inside him like sparkler flares, like promise. *I believe him.* He believed himself, the history of what was coursing through his veins. *If I can do that much, feel that strong, then maybe I can make it true.* Maybe-

A sphere of illumination sparked over his hands, sent them yelping backwards.

"Holy *shit*-"

"Dickfucking Christ, oh my God," Felix exhaled. The air crackled with potential energy, the power of what had existed there moments before. "That- That was-"

"- your zappy light thing," Changbin finished breathlessly.

"I guess so." Shakily, Felix brought his hands together again; shining through the branches above, fragments of sunlight dappled the skin of his palms. "Whoa."

"Yeah." Changbin raked a messy hand through his hair. "I've- I've never seen it manifest like that before."

"Me neither." Felix met his eyes again nervously, tried for a smile. "What do you think?"

If the mystified look on Changbin's face said anything, Felix had a feeling he wasn't done impressing his teachers. "I think it's a start."

Several attempts at repeating the previous miracle, their lesson ended up stretching late into the afternoon, until the sunset faded into blue twilight, and the moon took place of the sun. When Felix managed to a few more summonings that lasted more than five seconds, the pair ran out from the forest and gathered the rest of the coven in the main room for a demonstration.

Drawing from the moonlight that streamed in through the window, Felix shaped his hands into a sphere, centered his attention on the light over his palms. Honing in on the prickling sensation under his skin, he let out one more deep breath and pulsed out his hands, releasing it into the scintillating orb of radiant silver energy.

The group shocked back the way he and Changbin had with a murmuring rumble of "Jesus" and "holy *fuck*." They watched in frozen awe as Felix moved his hands around it, solidifying the shape, sent it floating up in the air.

Changbin bumped a flabbergasted Hyunjin with his arm. "Told you he could do it."

"So, does this mean he's a celestial?" asked Jisung. "Isn't that the star thing you do, Minho?"

Minho shook his head, staring up at the orb. "Stars are made up of hydrogen, helium, bits of preexisting debris in the sky- they can't be pulled out of thin air." His eyes drifted down to Felix's, glimmering with pride. "Felix just materialized the power of light itself."

"You know what this means," Chan declared, dimples poking out of the smile growing on his face. "Rise bright and early tomorrow, boys. Head to sparring field first thing."

Those who were able to rest their enthusiasm brought it to the bleachers in the morning. However, the result was less of a show and more of an impromptu test in which Felix, for his own wellbeing, asked a grand total of three times: "Are we sure this is safe?"

"Of course!" Jisung reassured him. The spriggan was currently in the process of replicating the world's largest ball of twine out of tree roots. "I whip these up every time the local jotunn start asking questions about the mortgage payment. Gets the target every time!"

"I think he misunderstood the question," noted Hyunjin as Felix swallowed down another query.

"If Felix acts quick on his feet, that much won't matter," replied Minho. With him, Soonie, Doongie, and Dori were actively terrorizing the same butterfly. "He's done well with his training so far- it'll be interesting to see how he does with this."

A few curious clouds had stayed in the sky, watching Felix shuffle his stance. With them, Chan and Changbin surveyed the scene from the left sect of the bleachers.

"My theory was confirmed," announced Changbin.

Chan looked up from scratching Berry's head. The demon motioned his head towards the angel on the field. "Seriously? When?"

"During training, yesterday. Deserter from heaven, just like I suspected. He blew up at his garrison, almost got a word in with the manager before they kicked him out. Clipped his wings, but hey. Still didn't stop him."

"That's crazy." Chan stared out in wonder at the angel on the field. "And he's still here."

"Funny, isn't it?" As Jisung readied the root slingshot between two trees, Felix shook out his hands. "Maybe they just thought it would be enough. Maybe they just wanted him gone, figured he'd be helpless on his own." Changbin laughed. "Now look at him."

With Jisung lifting his botanical monstrosity off the ground, Chan wasn't looking anywhere else. "Not even two weeks out, and he's already harnessed learning his own magic." While Berry distracted herself with a caterpillar, he glanced up at Changbin. "Why do you think heaven hasn't come back for him?"

He shrugged. "They think he's gone- another problem swept under the rug." Felix shaped a tentative rod of light with his hands, preparing himself. "They didn't know what he was capable of."

"Fire in the hole!" Jisung shouted, and let the vine bomb fly.

"Well, if heaven didn't kill him, that definitely will," quipped Chan.

"Dammit, Jisung, please don't make us get the gurney again," Hyunjin prayed under his breath.

Felix fixed his feet to the ground, faced the megalith coming at him head on. But the light in his hands flickered, fizzled out of its held shape.

Changbin pushed off of the bleachers. "Shit."

Minho started for him. "*Felix-*"

In the blink of an eye, the angel hurled a scythe of blinding white from the lash that had unfurled in his hands, slicing into the air and cleaving the roots in half.

The destroyed cannonball fell with a boom to the grass, and Jisung howled, both hands punching the air. Felix ran to meet Hyunjin and Minho halfway in an embrace for the ages; Jisung threw his arms around the group hug as they cried out in sweet victory.

Chan chuckled. "Man. What a dork."

"Exactly." Changbin watched them from under the shade of the evergreen, fondly with a smile they couldn't see. "Who wouldn't want a dork like that back?"

And finally, for the first time since Minho shoved the angel into his training schedule, Chan understood why his boyfriend did the things he did.

On the thirteenth night, Felix made his way up to the roof- not to fly again, or see if anyone was watching -but simply to marvel at how the sky looked without any clouds, a hazy royal blue with dots of sparkling pearls scattered about, how different it was to be a part of the below.

The sound of hurried scratching interrupted his thoughts; before Felix could wonder if he was about to meet one of the mountain beavers that Jisung had warned him about in his orientation, Kkami shot up over the tiles and skittered out over the gravel, growling after some unseen menace.

"*Fuck*- Kkami, I swear to God," Hyunjin's voice grumbled, and then he was climbing up after him, the irritation on his features shifting to surprise as he registered Felix's presence. "Oh. Felix, hey."

"Hi." Felix stole a glance at Kkami, who was now digging through the pebbles. "Does he, um. Do this often?"

"Nah, just about once every two weeks. Jisung thinks he's chasing after this domovoy spirit who lives in the pantry." Kkami barked angrily at what could have possibly been the uncovered roof. "He also climbs ladders. He's not fully a dog, but I don't know what else he is, so. Not limiting his capabilities."

"Understandable." Company hadn't been expected, but, in a place like Levanter, Felix had never had too much of a problem. "Wanna come up?"

"You sure? I don't want to interrupt any solitary brooding time."

"You wouldn't be," Felix giggled. "Come on. In case Kkami decides I'm possessed."

Hyunjin grinned, hauling himself up the rest of the way and folding into the spot next to Felix, head tipped up at the view. "Sure chose a nice night for some stargazing."

"You could paint it better," Felix responded easily. "Just felt as good a night as any."

Hyunjin hummed thoughtfully- musically, as everything he did was. "Last night before your wanderer's special is up." He scooted an inch closer. "So, what're you thinking? Made up your mind yet?"

Felix chuckled. "I don't know," he said. "I mean, if I stay any longer, Chan and Minho might make me start paying." Satisfied with his fruitless search, Kkami trotted over to their feet and laid down. "But. I don't know. Maybe I could."

"Sounds like there's a but at the end of that sentence."

"There is not! Just- *ugh*." Felix shut his eyes. "I don't know why this is so *weird*. I should've been thinking about this, all these two weeks."

"But instead you were living. Judging from what you've said about the up-there, you didn't do too much of that."

"Fuck, it was terrible up there." Felix couldn't find it in him to care if anyone heard; he'd already told them enough. "Being here, it's the most fun I've had in decades. I've done more, learned more than I ever could've in heaven. But I just feel like..." *Like they should be here with me*. "Like I shouldn't. Like I'm not ready for it."

Hyunjin nodded, taking that into a reasonable amount of consideration. "How come?"

There was still so much Felix hadn't told them about before, so much he couldn't possibly share yet. But he needed to say it: this was something he had to explain to himself too.

"It's like... I had this life. This freedom, here, on Earth, before I even knew of Eldritch. I'd live it, and meet people, have fun, feel things not even feel bad about it. I was doing what I wanted. I was myself, and that was okay. I didn't think it would ever go bad until..." Laughter turning to shouts, protests to screams. "Until it did, and it just makes me think. Everything seems so good now, but how do I know the same won't happen again?"

Sitting under the stars, it was the kind of confession a moonless night would draw out of anyone. Hyunjin probably didn't even know what to say to it.

At their feet Kkami growled in his sleep; Hyunjin's eyes rested pensively on his tiny frame. "I guess you don't, really," he murmured, "You sort of just, try to hope for the best, and pray it doesn't come back to haunt you later on."

"Ew, more prayer?" The siren laughed. "Why can't things just be more specific? Don't people make plans for a reason?"

"All the time. That's why shit changes- for better or for worse. When that happens, we try to work around it, make the most of it. If we're gonna improvise our way out, might as well, y'know?"

"And now I've got no choice." Felix groaned through a laugh. "Does it always feel this scary?"

"Scary? In the two weeks you've been here, you've aced everything you've done- baking, fighting, *and* magic. What do you have to be scared of?"

"Literally everything *else*?" Felix waved his arms out, though they couldn't possibly reach everything around them. "I mean, this world's so huge and weird and always changing. You never know what's going to happen next, or who you're gonna meet, or where you'll end up tomorrow. It's like you said, anything can happen. How do you *not* get scared of that?"

Hyunjin shrugged. "Easy. You accept it." Felix kicked his leg. Kkami growled in drowsy defense. "Come on, you have to sometime. Or else you'll never actually start living for yourself."

"How did you do it? Y'know, after leaving the Triangle?"

The mention of it still drew a veil over the siren's features, muted them softly. "It took me a while," he admitted. "Almost a year to really get the hang of it, but I started with the little things. Going out to smell the flowers, listen to some new music, right some wrongs." A remembering smile bloomed like one of Jisung's moonflowers. "Little by little, you let the past be the past, and the present sort of takes shape along the way."

Felix tried to imagine his own plan, how he would do it. There was that record store he still hadn't gone to. New recipes that Jiwoo had

recommended. People to meet in this strange little town he'd just dropped into. "How should I do it?"

"Take it day by day- something new for every little thing. Eventually, it'll feel so natural, you won't even have to try." Hyunjin nudged him affectionately. "You'll get the hang of it in time."

Time. For the first time, it finally seemed that Felix had enough of it for himself. "What do you think my present will look like?"

"Shit, I can't tell you that. You gotta make it yourself." Ruffling his hair, Hyunjin stood up. "But I'm sure you'll make it good." He gathered a sleeping Kkami in his arms. "Get some sleep. Save your planning for the morning."

He left Felix to his brooding with Kkami in one arm, ambling away in silence. Felix peeked back up at the moon, recalling how he'd watched it switch places with the sun on one of his first nights at Levanter. *Maybe I can do that again, one of these nights*, he thought. Tonight, though, he would fall asleep dreaming of tomorrow.

Eventually, after an inevitable nosedive into sleep, the first part of Felix's plan lead him into the main room kitchen at a respectable eight in the morning. Just a simple way to give back to the guys who'd been either buying or making him breakfast out of nothing but the goodness of their hearts. Who knew- maybe it could be a thing.

By the time Changbin came wandering into the room in a wrinkled tee and sweats, Felix had already raided the fridge of every sweet portionable option that could apply as a French toast topping. "Oh. Hey."

Felix tossed a smile over his shoulder as he stirred the ingredients for the base. "Morning."

The demon blinked, staring at the pantry harvest on the countertop. "You're making breakfast?"

"Thought it'd be a nice gesture, after everything you guys've done for me."

Changbin absently grazed a bottle of maple syrup, which was leading a row of other condiment bottles. "As a goodbye?"

"Actually." Felix set the batter down, brought out the sliced challah Minho had bought from Hyejoo on a discount. "I've decided I'm staying."

"S-Staying? Hold up, staying, as in-"

"Here, at Levanter. If that's alright with you."

"Alright? Are you kidding?" The laughter bubbling from his lips was genuine, pleasantly startled surprise. "That's- that's great. Better than great. I'm glad."

Of course, it was while Changbin was trying to sort through his stuttering that Felix noticed the thin manila folder he was holding behind his back. "What's that?"

The demon's eyes flicked down, like he'd forgotten it himself. "Oh, yeah. This old thing. Well. Yesterday, before you'd so conveniently told me you were sticking around, I..." Felix watched with poorly concealed amusement as he trailed, brought the folder out in front of him. "Sort of got you a going away present."

"Changbin!" Felix took the folder from his hands. *As if I could have left this.* "You're so sweet."

"It's nothing, really. Sort of customary to get something for the two-weekers when they go, around here- it's not even that nice, the only wrapping we have in this shithole are file folders." He slipped out the contents, stalling at the next breath. "See? Nothing."

Felix didn't reply. He fanned out the relics of records in his hands- Elton John, Gladys Knight, The Beatles, Stevie Wonder, icons from a

time he'd left too soon. "Did you find these at the record store?"

"Yeah. There's plenty more to find, but I remembered what you said about living in the 70's, and... sounded like a happy time for you then." Changbin peeked tentatively at his expression. "Just thought it'd be something you'd like to have with you."

Felix glanced up to catch his gaze; any intention he had of teasing him had left his mind. *As if I could leave you.* "It's not nothing," he told him finally. "Thank you."

Changbin smiled like fresh sunlight; the warmth was almost unbearable. "Anytime."

They could have been standing there for hours, just thankful that they could do it again tomorrow, until a door opened in the distance, and Hyunjin's crackling yawn interrupted the moment.

"Right. Breakfast."

"I'll get the others in. Uh." Changbin attempted a finger gun. "See you?"

"Sure." The demon turned on his heel, leaving Felix to his records. *I could get a frame for them in my room.* Now that he had one to decorate.

His eyes rested on the Stevie Wonder record- Signed, Sealed, And Delivered. If he remembered correctly, a record could hold a whole album of music. *Which means, if I get the right ring...*

Before he could lose his nerve, Felix raced over to the record player and placed it in, setting the jovial strum of electric sitar to play throughout the entire motel.

Changbin spun around halfway out the door to catch the beginning vocals. In response, Felix just half-smiled over a shrug. Really, he should have expected it.

*"Hey, hey,"**

A puff of laughter broke past the demon's bewilderment, and Changbin accepted defeat, shaking his head as he left.

"Oh, yeah, baby,"

Changbin swayed out the door, smiling to *"Like a fool, I went and stayed too long,"* as he melted back against the wall. A man cleared his throat, and he glanced up at Minho and Chan smirking down at him arm in arm. *"Now I'm wondering if your love's still strong, oh, baby,"*

"Shut up," he told them. Mercifully, the couple let him be.

"Here I am, signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours,"

"Apologies that it took me this long to realize," Chan continued to a satisfactorily smug Minho, "but did you actually convince Felix to stay just so you could set him up with Changbin?"

"I was mostly inspired by Jamie's latest tarot reading," Minho confessed. "She told me I would turn a project into something worthwhile. I didn't intend for it to be Felix, but the guy was so adorable, and I was getting a vibe from the universe, so I thought it would be fun. Plus, Changbin got Stupid Cupid* stuck in his head on the drive back from Oswego, so it was bound to happen anyways."

Chan sighed. "I am never going to understand how your mind works."

"Better that way. Oh- do you think if Felix starts apprenticing at PTT, we'll get their fifteen-percent discount?"

"But I love the way it does." Kissing his cheek, the vampire listened as the djinn chattered about tarot symbolism, and the pair promenaded on to the post chorus.

The record reached *"Oh, babe, you set my soul on fire,"* and Jisung came zooming into the main room from the backyard like a hyperactive blue hedgehog,* completely out of breath and elated. "Felix! You're still here!" Then, at the counter: "Oh, fuck yeah, French toast!"

"That's why I know you're my heart's only desire,"

Felix grinned, bigger than he had all week. "I'll save you the first stack."

Draped over the balcony, Hyunjin watched them go back and forth, chuckling to himself. He pushed off towards the stairs, harmonizing *"Here I am, signed, sealed delivered, I'm yours."* The chorus hitched a ride on the breeze, drifted away into the sky for all of the heavens to hear.

Heart Shaker - TWICE

*Waterloo - ABBA

*Dream Weaver - Gary Wright

*Like A Prayer - Madonna

*Signed, Sealed, Delivered - Stevie Wonder

*Stupid Cupid - Connie Francis

*Peace lily: Good health, strength.

*Brandon Lee, son of Bruce Lee, may he rest in peace.

*You're damn right I just made a Sonic reference with Bluesung in this here skz fic I had the power

New Romantics

Chapter 29: New Romantics

Apologies for that long hiatus, everyone! Now with the story (and my mentality) back on track, we can continue this road trip!

The boys are rolling out with the threat of Irene and HyunSung's will-they-won't-they behind them. But, as they venture into new territories, they're bound to be noticed by new beings, both familiar and dangerous. Let's get into it, fam.

'Cause baby, I could build a castle
Out of all the bricks they threw at me
And every day is like a battle,
But every night with us is like a dream...

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Shenandoah, Virginia - Present

Once all was well and settled down in Louisiana, it was back on the road they went.

"Bye!" yelled Youngjae from the watchtower as Jinyoung ferried the boys across the ocean. "Send us a call! Or a postcard! Or even a severed head, if you feel like it!"

Through some impractical miracle, the car was still parked on the shore of Holly Beach, untouched by a single hermit crab or seashell.

With some combined muscle, teamwork, and well-timed magical assistance, they were back on their way.

"It might be the dehydration kicking in," said Seungmin after they'd stopped at a wayward hillbilly kid's lemonade stand, "but this might be the best lemonade I've ever had."

"He said I looked like a woodland fairy," noted Jeongin. "I've decided to take it as a compliment."

Quarter of the way through, seeing a Batman cosplay on the side of the road by a totaled Batmobile-

"Oh, my Gotham."

"What the *fuck*."

"Holy Robert Pattinson," mused Hyunjin.

"Holy Michael Keaton," countered Chan.

"You're both wrong, it's Will Arnett," piped Felix.

And, of course, there was the entertaining development of Hyunjin and Jisung's whole situation.

"If you die as Karma Lee, I'm claiming the rest of your trail mix granola," Hyunjin whispered in Jisung's ear. They'd taken to occasionally bullying Changbin or Seungmin into switching seats with them at pit stops.

"She's literally the fastest character in the game, it's impossible to do that," Jisung shot back. "I thought you didn't like granola."

"I had to give you some benefit of the doubt." The demon monkeys screeched on his phone. Hyunjin notched his chin over his shoulder. "Man, how embarrassing it would be for the person you're dating to watch you fail on Level 14."

"Well, then it's a good thing I've got you to stop me from doing that, isn't it?" They split the same sickeningly sweet smile at one another, not even noticing as the avatar fell into the water.

"They *are* dating, right?" whispered Changbin to a relocated Seungmin. "That is what's happening, right?"

Even without any confirmation, they certainly weren't denying it. Every chance they got they were together- splitting snacks that had been previously off limits to the other, sneaking off behind landmarks, flirting with dialogue so wicked the others couldn't even tell if the tension was exasperated or sexual.

"And you guys are rooming together *why*?" asked Chan as the pair threw their bags into the same door at one of their motel stops.

"Cutting the expense costs," Jisung replied, and Hyunjin's hand yanked him in by the shirt collar while he closed the door after them.

"Guess they decided thirty-eight years of foreplay was long enough," observed Minho.

The morning after, Hyunjin emerged in borrowed grey jeans, the spriggan with a black tank on backwards, shoving instant coffee pods into his jacket pockets. Just before the siren slipped back into his designated seat next to Felix, Jisung passed them off to him with a kiss so subtle it might have been mistaken for a stolen whisper. Anyone who bothered checking the rearview mirror would have seen Hyunjin biting back a smile as he painted yet another deconstructed landscape piece of a dogwood-circled grass clearing with the grounds, and Jisung in the seat behind covering his own with his hand as he pretended to gaze out the window.

The path through Shenandoah was less of a road than it was a cut through the wilderness, a way for travelers to look out at every angle and see the autumn-stained maples and oaks, streaks of blazing orange painting over vibrant green, some with splatters of both. Hiding in the wood were Eastern redbuds and wild black cherry

trees, along with a few white-tailed deer and grey squirrels poking around for a piece of the harvest. If Hyunjin held Seungmin's Polaroid out far enough, he could even see ghostly outlines of the mountains for which the valley was known. It was the kind of natural beauty any road tripper could appreciate with Taylor Swift singing through their shuffle.

Until it happened: the car gargled, sputtered to a stop and broke down.

The backseat pulled out their earbuds, took their eyes off a window scene that had stopped moving. Brows furrowed tight, Chan pressed on the gas, twisted the ignition. Even the amplifier glyph on the dashboard had worn off.

Jeongin peeked over Changbin's head. "Did Ollivander just die?"

"Isn't this thing supposed to be magic?" added Hyunjin.

"Well, it's still a *car*," Minho replied, crumpling the glyph. "It still needs a battery, and henceforth, can still break down."

Sighing hard, Chan opened the side door. "Alright, everyone out."

Groans from all around made the car sound like a rising zombie graveyard.

"I thought this shit ended my days in the 50's," grumbled Changbin.

"Shut up about the 50's!"

"Alright, if Little Miss Sunshine is wrong, which it has not been yet," Chan started, reading aloud from the Wikipedia plot page he'd pulled up, "then this thing'll start moving on its own again when it reaches twenty miles per hour."

"That means whatever upper body strength you've been working to have, it better come in handy now," Minho called back.

"We're all riding on you, Binnie," whispered Hyunjin.

"We don't *know* if he directed that at me."

"Yes, I did."

"Everybody get behind a door or the trunk," Chan ordered. "Now, without taking it as an excuse to step on anyone's foot, push!"

As unwilling as they'd been to recreate Sisyphus' eternal struggle with his boulder, the gang certainly tried, taking advantage of a group effort. Once the vehicle started gaining traction, the speed crawl pushed their trudging walk into a jog, then a run.

"Back in the car, everyone!" called Minho, vaulting back into the front seat as Chan hopped into the driver's.

"I just want everyone here to know," started Felix, "that I am the preeminent Proust scholar of the United States!"*

"Get in the car, skippy," Seungmin told him.

Hyunjin and Felix took the left while Seungmin and Jeongin took the right; Jeongin zipped into fox form, letting his seat partner launch him inside then follow after. Jisung chased their trail, running on Hyunjin and Jeongin's encouragements before giving up and latching a root to the grab handle.

"Sometime, I forget those actually come *out* of you," mentioned Seungmin.

"Wait, where's Changbin?" asked Jisung.

For the demon, the race had proved to be a bit more of a challenge.

"If the universe gives the hardest battles to her strongest soldiers," panted Changbin, still running behind the car, "when did I sign up for the war?"

Minho cackled hard; the rest of the backseat cracked up with him. "This is the serotonin boost I needed," giggled Hyunjin.

"Chan, you unliving asshole, slow down!"

"I can't!" Chan shouted back, grinning way too wide. "You just gotta pick up the pace, buddy!"

"Come on, Bin, you can do it!" Jeongin cheered.

"Top heavy," snickered Jisung.

Seungmin dutifully pulled up the Rocky theme on the Bluetooth speaker, making everyone in the car lose it all over again, falling over their seats and slapping the headboards.

"Damn you, Min," huffed Changbin, who evidently still had it in him to curse him out.

"You can't very well run all the way to the edge of the world, Changbin," teased Minho, having whipped out his phone to film the pursuit.

"Don't listen to him Changbin, we believe in you!" yelled Felix.

Whether it was the angel's support or the peer pressure that gave him the extra burst of speed was unclear. But when the demon got close enough to reach for the door, the whole coven got in on it, egging him on, waving him closer. Hyunjin and Felix reached for his hand like God to Adam on his heavenly cloud, and on the musical climax of the third try, he finally grabbed hold, letting them haul him inside to a roar of applause.

"Assholes, all of you," Changbin chuckled, accepting the water bottle Jeongin tossed up from the cooler. "Man, Virginia must hate me."

"Nope, just us," Chan promised. He sent a dimpled smile after the demon's middle finger.

The next hour of the drive was filled with window shots and fall-themed song recs filling the rotation; driving through the blazing valley fields was the most peace they had experienced in almost a full week.

Somewhere during the second, the car ride had settled into its silence, which was filled quietly with the radio on low playing the one song anyone knew from Redbone,* punctuated every now and then by Jeongin cursing at his Quotev quiz results, because apparently, in terms of what kind of Little Debbie's snack he was, the quiz creator wouldn't know a Unicorn Cake son of a bitch if he smacked them in the face.

"Hey,"

"Hey," hummed Felix, scrolling through his Pinterest recipe board.

A demented screech from outside, and Chan only had enough time to swerve before a giant white eagle dive bombed into the road ahead.

"WHAT-"

"The shit-"

"Sorry, I *just now* got to sleep-"

"God, what the fuck are you *doing* up there?!"

By the time the boys piled out of the car their freshly dropped opponent was already lumbering to its feet- a great, ivory white, grotesque mass of a creature with a leering reptilian head of sharp teeth and calculatingly beady eyes, and angelic wings that looked horribly out of place attached to its lionlike body, whose merciless strength had already made a crater in the earth.

"Because of course we can't have one good day," Minho observed aloud as jaws dropped and snapped shut around him. "Anyone have

a clue what we got here?"

"One of heaven's most ruthless, unruly bastards," Felix supplied, unable to take his eyes away. "Chalkydri, usually sicced on some poor sinner who did enough to get the royal treatment."

"And we thought it was a good idea to travel in a group, so, natural selection?"

"Working hypothesis."

"Well, it's not blocking the entire road," Seungmin pointed out hopefully. "So, I don't know, maybe go back in, take the car chase route, go around it?"

Out of sheer, possibly adrenaline-fueled rage, the chalkydri rammed its side into the car, knocking it over like a drunken cow in the pasture.

"... y'know, it did just break down, so that would've been a premature decision anyway."

"Screw it." Changbin chucked his comic to the ground. "Let's deck this thing back into the sky."

The chalkydri was corralled in the midsection of the road by a display of enough magic to stop any monster in its tracks: Minho shaping a ring of blazing sunlight around the battle while Jisung made a beat with briar restraints summoned through the ground; with it, Hyunjin created a vociferous background out of We Will Rock You.* Felix stood as the voice of reason, trying to calm the beast with glowing palms and kind words.

"Easy, buddy," Felix soothed to a raging soundbite of *"Buddy, you're a young man, hard man, shouting in the street, gonna take on the world someday."* Chan and Changbin worked to make good on their promise by forming a defensive duo for him, batting back the beast's strikes when it got too close. "We don't mean any harm, just trying to

get back on the road. We all got places to be, right?" Angry screeching. "Damn, knew that was too open-ended. Guys, I don't think this is working."

"Going the semi-lethal route never does," Minho pointed out, drawing the circle tighter. "I get wanting to keep the kill count down, but this thing doesn't have reason to appeal to."

"You might be right," said Hyunjin. He never broke off midsong. "I think it's immune to Queen!"

"Maybe it's time we actually tried hurting it?" suggested Changbin.

Seungmin snatched fox form Jeongin out of the sweeping range of the chalkydri's tail. "If just for efficiency's sake!"

"Sung, having any luck with those briars?" asked Chan.

"I'm trying," Jisung gritted out, sweat beading on his brow. He had to have rounded up a full cluster of brambles by now. "It won't stay in one place!"

With a ululating scream, the chalkydri thrust out its wings, thoroughly slicing the brambles.

"Why does it have six fucking pairs of wings?" shrieked Hyunjin.

"If it makes you feel better, they used to have twelve?" yelled Felix.

Cursing, Minho tore to the front of the group, dissolving the ring into a laser that barreled into the beast's torso, sending it crashing into the path ahead, giving Jisung just enough time to buckle into Chan's arms before it rolled back onto its feet, another roar building in its throat.

"Damn thing won't quit," grumbled Changbin.

But the chalkydri lumbered only a few steps forward before the earth in front of it cracked, gargled- yep, gargled -and gave way for a

splitting geyser that smacked its head up in a nasty uppercut. The monster didn't even hit the ground when the water lifted out of its crater and swirled around it like a crystal ball. Then, as if the water was displeased with its find, hurled the chalkydri into the clouds.

The boys watched their interruptor disappear into the blue. They glanced at Hyunjin for an explanation only to find that the siren hadn't moved an inch. "I'm flattered you think I'm that cool, but that was not me."

"Fortunately, I am." A voice emerged from the forest, keen with easy confidence. The owner swept out of the bushes- a girl with sharp, almost classical features, lush auburn hair sporting charm-laden braids in a vintage summer tee and shorts and a self-satisfied expression to match her tone. "While the same can't be said about your car, I'd say you guys are-" Her words ran away from her halfway through, face crumbling into a look of surprise. "Hyunjin?"

All eyes flashed back to Hyunjin. "Yeji."

The sound of her name brought back every time it had ever been brought up in Levanter, and furrowed brows slacked into dropped jaws left and right. Jeongin held out his palm, into which Chan slipped a twenty. In a sudden rush of consciousness, Jisung hurriedly righted himself on his feet.

"No way," Changbin murmured in disbelief. Seungmin and Minho full on rolled their eyes. Even without Felix pointing excitedly between the two- whose expressions were so similar nothing could be blamed but genetics -the connection almost didn't have to be brought to sound.

Hyunjin decided the best way to cross the border was by saying: "I'm sorry, out of all the places you could have relocated, you decided on fucking *Virginia*?"

The emotion in Yeji's face shattered. "Are you *serious*?"

And whatever wall built up between them crumbled away, no match for the spitfire discourse erupting between twins who had never found a better way to settle a score.

"Well," said Minho brightly. "Guess the second time's the charm."

"There were a lot more tears in the last one," Seungmin recalled.

"Should I introduce myself?" Jisung wondered aloud, stepping forward and back. "I should. Probably. Sometime."

"I don't see you for years, and *that's* what you fucking say?" Yeji shouted.

"Well, given you were the one who left *me*, I think my reaction was pretty sufficient!" Hyunjin fired back.

"Right, I knew my memory was fuzzy on a few details," Jeongin mused.

Repossessing the voice of reason mantle, Felix jumped in the middle. "Hi! Sorry, hi. Um. Before you guys kill each other, Jin, maybe we could take a minute to appreciate that your sister just saved our lives?"

The reminder that other beings were present seemed to diffuse the situation a little bit. Hyunjin slipped a glance back at the coven, momentarily lingering on Jisung. "Fine."

"Much appreciated," said Yeji, taking the grace period to accept the thanks. "Name's Yeji, in case you needed to give it a face. And, since you all must have spent a while with my brother here, my condolences."

"You saltwater bitch-

"Did you know we were in danger?" asked Chan.

"I happened to be close," admitted Yeji, ducking under the thicket. "Virginia isn't just a US history dump- come fall season, the fae community has a farmer's market on Sundays across the river. Usually nothing happens when someone crosses the border, but a chalkydri flying down from the sky can catch anyone's attention."

"The border?" repeated Seungmin.

"You guys have one in your town, don't you? A partition from the mortal veil, a spot where it ends. The worst that usually happens is a glitch like someone's shoes switching feet, or an object moving place-"

"Or a car breaking down," finished Changbin.

"You told us you had a place for us," cut in Hyunjin. "Should we expect some disgraced murder shack?"

The glare Yeji darted at him over her shoulder burned like seawater to the eyes. "I got a place, okay? I live there with my coven."

"Your *coven*?"

"What, you thought I lived in the forest backwoods on my own? We might not get company often, but I wouldn't just make you void your car to the middle of nowhere. Nice voiding, by the way, we don't get that much around here."

Minho, who'd never been complimented on his voiding took the compliment with a pleased smile. "Jin, I'm sure you've been through shit with your sister, but she's actually passing the vibe check."

"She's still got a lot to answer for in terms of leaving me on an island for the next hurricane," Hyunjin replied sourly. "Let's just see how she does for that."

"Are there any other lost family members we should be aware of?" piped Felix. "Because if this happens again, I want to be prepared."

"Fuck off," Hyunjin sniped, shoving him into a bush he deftly avoided.

Seeing his opening, Jisung crept up carefully behind the siren and tapping his shoulder, holding up his hands in surrender when he flinched around. "Just me." He trudged up the grass after Hyunjin. "So," he started. "Just so I've got the family tree straight- you're a siren, your brother's a leviathan, and your sister's-"

"A nereid, sea nymph," answered Hyunjin. Another arrow struck in the form of a thought. "I guess I'm introducing both my siblings to my boyfriend."

He left Jisung staggering at the thought, one foot almost knee deep in a pothole. "I'm getting into this family if it kills me."

"That's the way," Chan encouraged, patting him on the back.

Amber orange fir trees walled both sides, embroidered with faces of wild deer and squirrels until, in a sparkling flurry of leaves, it broke away for rolling hills of opulent, eternal green.

"Mother of all fucks," whispered Minho in awe.

"Permission to make so many Night at the Museum references," whispered Jeongin.

"Permission granted.

"When you crossed the mortal veil, you found yourself in Nysa," revealed Yeji, stretching out her arm towards the massive Greek palace shining in magically polished marble atop the hill like Olympus brought down to earth. "Welcome to Voltage."

"Chan," started Jeongin, tugging on the vampire's sleeve. "Are we poor?"

"... I think the phrase you're looking for is selectively modest."

Yeji ushering them on, they climbed up the grass as she casually explained the land's historical connection to forest nymphs, which just happened to be the ones who consoled Daphne as a forest when Apollo's chase wouldn't let up.

"I'm going to say this out of not jealousy, but honest curiosity," whispered Seungmin. "What the hell."

As they reached the backyard, which apparently was a monumental apple blossom tree and a dining bench the length of a school bus with a solid gold brazier in the center, a blur of white soared towards them past the pillars of the palace- it took the shape of a swan for only seconds before it enlarged, absorbed its feathers and transformed into a girl that turned the rest of the trip into a running stride, bleach blond hair flying out behind her. "Yeji!"

A grin split across the nereid's face. "Thanks for the welcome, Jisu." Then, down at her feet. "You too, Yuna."

The boys stepped back to see a black cat with a white shock of fur over the heart trotting out over the grass, pausing to stretch and straightening up to grow out of its fur and shapeshift into their second guest: a petite girl with wavy black hair that turned silvery white in the forelocks and a lopsided grin, the only evidence of her transformation a pair of slit-pupiled peridot eyes. "Nice to see you brought the sacrifices."

"Quit it, they're already in trouble as it is." *She's joking*, Yeji mouthed to them. Jisung released a sigh of relief. "Stray Kids, meet Jisu and Yuna, swan maiden and cait sith. And, JiYu, this is-"

"You don't need to point him out, he looks just like you!" Jisu zipped around her to find Hyunjin. "Hi. Jisu. Love your work."

"Ah, so I've been mentioned," said Hyunjin. Yeji rolled her eyes.

"She had to have learned good music from someone. Oh, quick q- did 50's Yeji have pinup curls? Don't need a photo, just the mental

image."

Seungmin edged closer to Yuna, cleared his throat. "About the sacrifices-"

"Dude, you're good. I was kidding."

"Oh, no, I wasn't worried about that. I just want to know who you would kill if given cause."

"Oh- Yuna!" Yeji pulled her aside, a flare of worry streaking over her face. "Did you hear back on how the job went?"

"Chaeryoung texted back five minutes ago," Yuna replied. "They're on their way back."

The nereid's expression relaxed. At Chan's quizzical look, she flushed softly pink. "Chaeryoung's another member. Ryujin's my girlfriend."

"You have a girlfriend?" enunciated Hyunjin.

"Did you say Ryujin?" Changbin echoed, a shade paler than usual.

"Yes, yes, I found a woman who could stand me, shove it," Yeji went on, ignoring him and aiming the jab at her brother. "Sure, there's the matter of differing elements, her being a lampad and all, but we've made it work."

Jisu and Yuna traded practiced smirks behind her back. But Changbin only appeared more shaken. "Your girlfriend is a lampad named Ryujin."

"Don't know any other one." This time, on a belated double take, Yeji directed her suspicion at him. "What did you say your name was again?"

Gently, Felix touched the back of his hand. "Hey." The demon startled back at the contact. "You okay?"

"I... y-yeah, I just-"

A whoosh from the apple blossom tree cut him off, followed by a whoop from Jisu. Out of the trunk's shadow strode two figures- a wraith with wavy brown hair and the most respectable combination of Y2K and dark academia, the second a lampad with a razor blue bob and silver leather jacket, face set in a punk rock grin.

"You made it!" Jisu cheered, hauling the brown haired girl out the rest of the way with an embrace she bashfully returned. "How'd it go?"

"The chimera was already halfway out of the catacombs- we just helped give him an extra shove out the door," replied the lampad. "We were about ready to leave when we got Yeji's message about stragglers."

"Ryujin," Changbin said suddenly, moving out of the background into the light, eyes locked on her like he'd watched a meteor crash into the earth, the weight of her name heavy as the moon.

"Not this shit *again*," groaned Seungmin.

"Wait," shushed Minho. "Is that *her*?"

The lampad turned her attention to him, and her grin stepped off the cliff of her face. Her mouth opened, stammered around soundless words- but then, like she never thought she'd say the word again: "Bin?"

Yeji edged around Chan and Hyunjin, taking in the demon again with fresh context. "Holy shit," she muttered in amazement.

Wordlessly, as if by impulse, they started towards each other- tentative at first, unsure if the light was playing tricks on their eyes. Then, like they couldn't stand another second, in a sprint that kicked up grass as they reached each other in the space between, arms grappling around neck and waist, holding tight.

"Holy fuck," Changbin gasped as he pulled back, strangled with emotion. "What are you doing up here?"

"You made it back," said Ryujin, voice matching his for tone and fervor. Abruptly, as if she'd found a forgotten detail in his face and wanted to switch up the mood, she clenched her fist into a fireball and slammed it into his gut. "Asshole!"

"GOD-"

"You made everyone think you were taken by seraphs and eaten by Lucifer, and you've been here all this time?"

"*Dammit*," Changbin choked out, a laugh breaking out through the pain. "Jeez. Forty-one years, and no one's taught you to cut that-"

Ryujin shocked his words to a halt in a double whammy of a hug, one he returned as easily as the forlorn smile that spread over his face like morning mist. "I thought you were gone."

"Hey." Changbin loosened the hold to step back, not to strike, but to deliver the smile into her eyes. "We're both here."

And for a moment they just stood there, time frozen in a photograph taken decades before, somewhere beautiful and safe and unknown to anyone who hadn't been there when it was taken. It looked like they had done so a million times before. It looked like they were about to-

"So," Jisung interrupted. "That's... great. What the hell is it."

Just like that, the facade fractured and fell to the ground, Changbin and Ryujin snapping back to the present day to find Felix staring blankly at their position and Yeji trying her damndest not to laugh.

"Oh. Well," started the demon, sidestepping away from Ryujin.

"Guys, this is Ryujin, my-" Brows furrowed, pause. He glanced at the lampad, pointed between her and Yeji, and she answered happily

with a vigorous nod. Shooting a finger gun of approval, he turned back to the group. "Ex girlfriend."

Jeongin sniffed a still-apatetic Felix's shoulder. "I smell jealousy~"

Eyes fixed dead ahead, Felix shoved him to the ground.

"You're fucking with me," said Changbin, but Ryujin nodded, telling him to believe it. "There's catacombs in northern Virginia?"

"Old 18th century Christians had to practice somewhere. The chimera wasn't doing anything bad- he was just chewing on the bones of old saints. Not exactly my place to care, but the locals thought some relocation was in order, so. Job."

"How much did they pay you?"

"For Chaeryoung to void him into a butterfly field in Lexington? Enough for me not to complain."

"Slimeball."

The pair took turns bumping shoulders, giggling down the halls of the palace. Behind them, Felix humphed, pretending to look anywhere else, as MinChan noted gleefully.

"Funny, I didn't think this would be the thing to spurn them," mused Minho.

"All this will-they, won't-they, something had to," replied Chan.

Meanwhile, Hyunjin tried neutrally to gauge a clear reaction out of his sister. "So you're completely okay with." He gestured up at the demon and lampad. "All that?"

"You mean the fact that your roommate turned out to be the one who got away from my girlfriend four decades ago?" Yeji shrugged.

"Yeah. She told me about him when we met, which was roughly

around 1982, mind you, so I knew who he was. I know I'm not a rebound, but I just..."

"Just?"

A sigh. "I just thought he'd be taller."

Hyunjin scoffed. "So did his parents." She chuckled; one of the first he'd heard from her. "I'm- uh." Yeji perked up. "Nothing. It's- um. It's good that you got someone you don't have to worry about losing."

The nereid smiled, a delicate, private expression she held to herself. "Yeah." A few paces forward, she edged closer. "So, that spriggyan you've been looking at all worried and shit-"

"Oh God-"

"I knew it. I *knew* you guys were together."

"You couldn't have waited for me to tell you?"

"Please, that would've taken *forever*."

Walking down the halls of Voltage was more like strolling through the glory days of an early BC temple, but there were bits of decor that made it feel more like a home, like the native flowers veining the filigreed ceilings, framed posters of New York Dolls and boygenius sharing wallspace with Renaissance paintings and clothesline strings of family Polaroids, glances into rooms decked out with thriftstore furniture instead of statues; a different kind of history.

"And over there's the rooms where you guys will be staying," Jisu carried on, gesturing to the right as they turned a corner. "Then, on the left, the swimming pool, which used to be a communal punch bowl in the 90's."

"Had to use a lot of disinfectant to get out the Kool-Aid residue," added Chaeryoung.

"And over here's the ballroom!" sang Yuna, jazz sliding to wave a hand the open door to their left. "Looks boring all on its own, but it's pretty great."

"You guys have a *ballroom*?" Felix repeated, gliding inside with elated wonder.

"We've tried to multipurpose it for something else, but something always happens in here," said Yuna, observing his excitement with delight. "One time, we invited a flock of harpies over and they filled the place with the opening number to Cabaret."

The angel pulled Hyunjin aside by the arm, both of them matching each others' energy with giddy hushed whispers and laughs that were amplified by the acoustics of the room. Out of their periphery, Jisung tried to temper a grin to save face while Changbin hid a crescent smile behind his eyelashes- an action that did not go unnoticed by Ryujin.

Moving up to the living room, where some of the finest of Ikea's summer collection had been stationed, was where they got down to business, five on one side and eight on the other.

"We don't usually do this often," stated Yeji, "But given the circumstances, we're willing to give you a chance."

"Won't cost much, given you already have the brother discount," brought up Jisu.

"Nepotism for the win," piped Hyunjin, scoring a high-five from Minhø.

"Can I get one?" asked Changbin. All eyes flashed to his unchanged nonchalance, which didn't seem to waver. "Just because, y'know."

"Dude," Jisung hissed.

"No," deadpanned Ryujin.

"What? Come on."

"Nice try," Yeji told him with a smirk.

"So, if you're not charging us for room and board," said Chan, already tallying up the costs. "Can we at least pay you back for the car, or-"

"You kidding? Don't worry about that," said Jisu. "Just don't scuff the marble-"

"Or bring up Quentin Tarantino," mentioned Chaeryoung.

"Or ask about the boiler room," Ryujin hitched on.

"Or feed Hongsam any peanut butter," parlayed Yuna.

"- and you're good."

Seungmin clicked his pen shut; he'd written down all the instructions on a notepad. A few exchanged looks passed around the right side, and the consensus adjourned with a nod from Minho. "Acceptable terms," he declared. "We'll take it."

Taking Yeji's hand in a handshake that smelled vaguely of sea salt, meteor smoke, and mutual respect, the deal was made.

The sun descended from the sky, and the backyard was treated as a free-for-all for essentially whatever anyone felt like doing. Jeongin reverted to fox form and curled up blissfully on the three-planed bed Jisu told him was called a triclinium,* Seungmin genially following suit. On the steps of the terrace, Chan and Minho clamored eagerly over the blueprints of Greek architecture given to them by Chaeryoung- they had been used in the original designs of Voltage. In the guise of a black cat, Yuna delivered Hyunjin the scrapbook of Itzy's history throughout the years- 90's included. And, to the far right on the dining benches, Changbin was animatedly regaling Ryujin on every adventure that had led them up to now.

"Everybody's yelling 'Heist! Heist! Heist!' on the way, and the real action hadn't even started yet! Oh, you're laughing now, but just wait till you hear how Hyunjin took out Jungwoo and Yuta."

Sitting against the trunk of the apple blossom tree, Felix pushed down the twist in his stomach. *Let it happen- they've been apart for literal decades.* Ryujin had made it clear she had a girlfriend. They were both over it.

But when Changbin threw out his arms too wide and almost toppled sideways off the bench, Ryujin grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back upright, cackling as he stumbled back on track. Watching from so far away, it felt wrong- like he was catching a glimpse of something personal, something like what they shared in hell. *With no context, they really do look right together.*

"Jeez, you're still at it?"

Felix jumped half a foot from the ground. Yeji snorted, cracking up. "You're gonna need a better hobby if you're gonna stay here."

He smoothed his hoodie out, sheepish. "It's- It isn't like that."

"Well, even if it isn't, I wouldn't worry." She dropped into the spot next to him framed by splayed roots; Felix scooted over to make room. "Trust me- there's better things to do than worry about what's in their past."

That, Felix supposed, was probably true. "You might not have to worry, but." *It doesn't change the way he looks at her.* "It's different. For me, at least."

The nereid's humor subsided. Reaching up to the hollow heart of the tree, she produced a perfect white conch shell, which she placed in his hands. When he did nothing more than blink, Yeji mimed putting it up to her ear. "Listen."

Awkwardly, Felix held up the conch to his temple the way he remembered people holding box telephones, trained his ear to the sound while his eyes focused on the scene unfolding over the benches.

"... and sure, I looked all gung-ho and shit, but when that fireball was coming at my face, I thought for sure I was going to end up back in the Eighth with a whole lot of explaining to do for Landry. And before I could even *blink*, like a *shot* he grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me back in, and no, I was not blushing, that was the fire passing my back." Ryujin's wheezing laughter reverberated through the conch shell. "Hey, c'mon, how else was I supposed to react? He's literally God's blueprint for an angel. Might've fallen from the sky instead of falling, but it's still true." This time, the laugh was Changbin's, soft and abashed. "Closest to heaven I'll ever get."

Whatever Ryujin said next that made him blush even harder and shove her away went unheard- Yeji had already caught the conch as it started slipping out of Felix's hands. "What'd I say?" She tucked the shell neatly back in its hollow, smug satisfaction adorning her features. "Nothing to worry about."

Felix smiled, nodded absently, the sound of 'closest to heaven I'll ever be' singing in his ears. "What do you think's gonna happen, then? Now that they've found each other?"

"Talk, hopefully- hell knows they have enough to go over. Obviously, they still care about each other, so, if things go well, maybe they can find a way to have a place in each others' lives."

Felix thought about the pain in Changbin's face when he brought up seeing Ryujin in his nightmare. *He's always had so much love to give. There was a pretty big difference between missing someone and missing what you had with them.* Beside him, Yeji watched her girlfriend laugh with an uncomplicated fondness that wasn't cluttered with worry. *She'd know it just as well.* "And you?" The nereid bristled. "What're you going to do now that Hyunjin's here?"

Hyunjin was still poring over the Itzy photo album with Yuna's guidance; Yeji still looked wary of his presence, like he was an alien who'd crash landed the hour before rooting through her fridge instead of a family member. "What I can," she said quietly, resigned. "Try to ease back in, give him time, then, when he's willing to listen, try to explain myself." Briskly, she shook her head. "If I've earned it in time, anyways."

"I think you will." She raised a brow; an expression so comically similar to Hyunjin's that Felix laughed. "I'm serious. You've already saved us from a chalkydri, given us a place to stay, and offered to fix our car. If there's a better way to get a head start, I don't know it." She ducked her chin to shield a smile. "He misses you too. He'll listen to what you have to say."

"He's right, though." Through auburn strands, her eyes shone through; burnished turquoise like a wounded sea. "I did leave him. You weren't there when I did what I did- said what I said."

"But I have been there to see him regret the part he played in it. It's not like you won't be able to make up for it."

"What if I get the chance? What if he actually listens, and I find a way to fuck it up again, and I lose the love that wasn't even there?"

Back when he was in heaven, watching emotions take control of people had been fascinating to Felix; deep inside of everyone, regardless of how it took root, there was pain. It affected the way every living thing acted and thought. It was before he'd felt anything like it himself, realized just why it disguised itself as caution. He just knew it wasn't meant to be a driving force for everyone. *And that's why I wanted to help introduce a new one.*

"Then you're assuming he stopped loving you from the start," he said simply. "Love isn't a chance someone gives us- it's something that's given without our control or permission, that stays with us forever." Changbin and Ryujin laughing through the awkwardness of starting

over was living proof that two people able to bridge over the gap of lost time. "When it's strong enough, it'll always come back to you."

Back on the benches, the story had come back full circle, Ryujin having somehow made sense out of it.

"Nine rings," the lampad guffawed. "Sounds like a wild ride."

"And that's all just the shit that's happened in between," Changbin agreed. "Who knows what wild thing's going to happen here?"

"What, this hasn't been wild enough for you?"

"Please, doll, this is just another Thursday." Another laughing eye roll; that reaction hadn't changed much. Changbin still hadn't fully registered that he was seeing it again for himself. "I still can't believe you're here."

Ryujin gave a contented sigh. "Sometimes, neither can I."

"I mean, last I remember, you didn't really plan on coming up to earth." A challenge rose in a droll expression. "Which I don't judge you for." Challenge dropped: *proceed*. "I see you lost the jacket."

"Oh, that old thing?" She flicked her hand dismissively. "Wasn't mine to keep. Besides, I lost it when..."

She didn't have to finish: *when everything went to shit*. "How the hell'd you pull it all off? I thought the seraphs got you for sure."

"I hadn't planned to, but- it seemed like the only option. I couldn't run back to my grove, and I couldn't just leave everyone else hanging, so, up I went." Briefly, the spark in her eye dimmed, flashing back to what it had taken to make the climb. But the toe of a red Chuck sneaker nudging a black combat boot made her look up, mouth flinch into a wry smile. "It's okay, I don't regret it. Not even a little."

"It sure wasn't the plan."

"Not Plan A- Plan B's always messier. You just come up with it on the spot and hope it works out." She cast her gaze softly to the grass, as if she could see the workings of the underground. "The first few weeks were the hardest. All I really got out of it was the escape part- the rest I just had to prepare myself for on the fly. But I did alright." Under the table, she nudged him back. "'Sides. You gave me enough of a mental picture with all the stories you told."

"Those stories were about *Chicago*, not the Old fucking Dominion."

"Come on, I wasn't about to be scared of Bambi's mom. I did okay on my own." Changbin paused, waiting for the second half. "Until Jisu found me setting squirrel traps in the forest."

"Wow."

"Oh, *fuck* you."

"Not even a week, and you went full redneck."

"I can use my body as a blowtorch, man- forgive me for utilizing what my unholy creator gave me."

"Sure, sure." *Man, she hasn't changed a bit.* He wouldn't have expected any differently. "Sounds like everything's been all right for you, too- got the coven, the hideout, the girl, everything." She made an acknowledging face- *true, true.* "I'm glad you found it. Even if it wasn't what you'd had in mind."

"Well, obviously we both had better things to do then cry over Elvis." The smirk on her face drew him up quick. "Come on. What happened to 'closest thing to heaven?' I know something's there with you and that angel guy- you just haven't said shit yet."

"Hey, I'm giving it time-"

"*Please*, bet you've been saying that for years. You would've done the same with me, if I hadn't made the first move."

"Like I needed the reminder."

"Maybe you did- back in hell, we had all the time in the world. I think we've both learned that up here's way more unpredictable." Waving her off, he dumped the side of his face into one hand, pretended to look off into the distance. "He's sweet. A good egg. Morally decent- can see where heaven factored into the upbringing."

Changbin scoffed. "Too good even for them."

"Then you might want to do something before one of your wild things kill the mood." With his free hand he flipped her the bird. In response, she snapped a spark at his hand that stung it into resignation. "If you don't do something, you know I will."

"Oh, I'm shaking with fear."

"You should be." But the threat split a smile across both their faces, and soon enough they were laughing again, just at the idea that they were. "You deserve that much. As long as you're here, I'm not letting you forget it."

"Thanks, Ryu." With the same hand she'd sparked, he held it out to her. "Friends?"

She didn't need any more encouragement to accept. "If it makes the nine rings crumble into oblivion for good."

"Hey, Ryujin!" Jisu called from the triclinium. "Did you hear anything about this Little Miss Sunshine movie?"

"Changbin told me about it! Apparently it's something I have to watch before Teslas take over the motor vehicle industry?" He nodded; she'd gotten the description right.

"Did he also tell you how he almost got a heart attack trying to chase after the car?" Jeongin joined in.

The lampad whipped around with new interest in Changbin's apparently unfinished story. "He did *what?*"

Changbin was already letting go of her hand, pointing it purposefully at the grinning gumiho. "That was to be sworn into *coven secrecy*-"

"Hey, hey, *hey*," Ryujin shushed him, waving the boy over. "Let the kid speak, I wanna hear this."

"Wait, you didn't tell her?" Minho asked. Beside him, Chan snapped the blueprints shut.

"Guys, come on-"

"Now, *Changbin*," said Jisung, disappointed as he dusted off his jeans. "We all know cardio isn't your strong suit, but you don't need to lie completely just to hide it."

"No, no, *no*-"

But it was too late; the boys were already rushing forth in a stampede that thoroughly drowned out his shouts for order, cramming into the bench before Ryujin with the sole purpose of squeezing him off. Just as he was about to hit the ground, however, Felix caught him by the crook of his arm.

"Come on, dummy," the angel laughed. The hazy light of the half moon traced a subtle halo around his head. "You can at least have the dignity of keeping your seat."

Dumbly, not wanting to say anything that could change his seat partner's mind, Changbin let Felix haul him up, both pushed to the edge of the bench, leaning in to hear Hyunjin kick off the rebooted report to, "So, get this..."

And for that night, with the demons slumbering below the ground and the angels barricaded by the clouds, the story was safe in the forest.

Levitating - Dua Lipa

*Come and Get Your Love - Redbone

*We Will Rock You - Queen

*Little Miss Sunshine, a terrific movie that everyone should watch at least once in their lifetimes.

*Triclinium, literally the best invention of the Roman era, a dining table with couches along three sides, you just laid on them with your food on a table in the center and snacked with your buddies it was great.
